

PREMCHAND



by

MADAN GOPAL

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AS an introduction to the life and works of Munshi Premchand a master of the craft of fiction who, in the realm of Hindustani short story, stands on a pinnacle all his own and is easily the best Hindustani novelist to date. It is not an exhaustive study, but is rather a suggestive and partial inquiry, based on an intelligent, careful and painstaking study of all that Premchand wrote. The first and the only book on the subject, it is an original, first-hand critical appreciation of his works; and within this short space the author has compressed material which could have easily gone to make a book of over 400 pages.

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PREMCHAND, Munshi—pen-name of Dhanpat Rai Srivastava—Born in Mundhwa Lamhi, near Benares, U P, on August 10, 1881, died at Benares on October 8, 1936. mother died when he was 7 and father at 15. first wife, married when he was 13, left him in 1904 and he remarried a child widow. Became a teacher in 1899 and served in the Education Department, U. P., till 1921, when he resigned his post to support Gandhiji's non-co-operation movement. Worked as editor of "Maryada" and "Madhuri" and started "Jagaran" and "Hans" from self-established Saraswati Press. Literary life began in 1901: articles in the *Zamana*, Cawnpore, first short story in 1907, left over 220 stories on his death. First novel in 1901 but that which stamped him as a writer of marked ability was "Sevasadan", or *Bazaar-i-Husn* (1914), followed in rapid succession by "Premashram", or *Gosha-i-Afiat* (1922), "*Nirmala*" (1923), "Rangabhumi," or *Chaugan-i-Hasti* (1924), "Kayakalp," or *Parda-i-Majaz* (1928), "*Ghaban*" (1930), "Karmabhumi", or *Maidan-i-Amal* (1932), "*Godan*" (1936); and "Mangal Sutra" (incomplete). Joined a film company as a scenario writer in 1934, but gave it up in disgust. One of the founders of Progressive Writers' Conference.

To

BANNING RICHARDSON

PREFACE

In presenting this treatise, I need offer no apologies, for a book on Munshi Premchand is long overdue.

Of the four outstanding figures in Indian literature—Rabindranath Tagore, Iqbal, Saratchandra Chatterjee and Premchand—the last alone remains almost unknown to the English-reading public. Although a prolific writer who served Hindustani literature by his selfless devotion for over 35 years and gave Hindustani a place in the languages of the world, not a single biographical book on him, nor a satisfactory literary appreciation of his works, exists to-day—a need which I have here endeavoured to meet.

I am aware that the treatment of so vast a subject has been in many places rudimentary, and fondly hope some time, if and when circumstances permit me, to carry out this task more fully in a full-dress biography of the subject of these pages.

In the following pages, italicised names of novels, short stories and magazines refer to publications in the Persian script; those within "quotes" to publications in the Devnagari script; and those italicised and "quoted" to those which bear the same name in both scripts.

The plan of this book is simple. In the first chapter, we meet the artist face to face and trace the course of his life. In the second chapter, we plunge into the general tendencies that characterise his works, as also study the technique and the purpose and object of his writings. The exposition of these tendencies in his novels and short stories forms the subject matter of chapters three and four respectively.

M. G.

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INTRODUCTORY

Munshi Premchand holds a unique place in Hindustani literature, written in both the Persian and the Devnagari scripts. Head and shoulders above modern Hindustani writers, he constituted the advanceguard of literature, particularly of the so-called "modern tendencies." Quite a large number of his works have been translated into other Indian languages; and he is by no means less popular in south India than in the north.

To his successors he remains a tower of inspiration. Not a few of them owe a deep debt of gratitude for the direct and indirect help and encouragement that he freely and ungrudgingly gave.

What distinguishes Premchand from other writers in India and what is the most marked characteristic of his works is that in them we see, with a truly cinematographic vividness, the reel of events and feel the temper of the tumultuous times in which he lived. Through his short stories, articles, dramas and novels, he has put an epoch on paper.

The thirty years before Premchand's death in 1936 were years of unprecedented stress and storm in the history of India. They were years of conflict—conflict between the Old and the New, between the East and the West, between the individual and society and between the individual and the State. During this

period, old ideas and ideals were subjected to merciless criticism; a great transformation was brought about in the Indian fabric. None knew what lay around the corner. In spite of this, the people struggled on, guided by an unknown force: they pitched their hopes and ambitions high, but deep were their frustrations.

Premchand is more of an historian. His works, pen-photographs of contemporary society, re-echo the changing conditions of existence and psychology under the impact of various currents of thought; they are full of action. In time he became the faithful, though unofficial, chronicler of the national struggle in India. He became to Gandhiji what Maxim Gorki was to Lenin; the resemblances between the two are many. Premchand closely studied contemporary problems, movements and personalities and, through the agency of fiction, put them on paper, throwing them into greater relief.

The future Gibbon of India, when trying to understand these times from the biographies of India's great leaders, will profitably draw upon Premchand's works for a true and reliable picture of the times.

True literature is true history. Far from being merely a chronological record of wars, successions, *coups d'etat* and bloodshed, the function of true history, as that of true literature, is to bring the reader into intimate contact with life, the life of the masses. It ought to be the March of Time in print—an ideal which Premchand, unlike other authors, successfully achieved.

In more than one sense, Premchand was a standard-bearer. Before he came to break new ground, the short story was unknown and novels were few and second-rate. What heightens Premchand's stature furthermore is the medievalism that existed in Hindustani literature; it was characterised by spicy tales of

romance, imagination and adventure, mystery castles and labyrinthine corridors, jinns and fairies, courtiers courtesans and medieval patriarchs riding horses on mountain-tops and wielding powerful swords—all a world of dreamland and phantasy, far removed from realities.

Premchand transformed all this. The scenes were now enacted in villages and towns; the heroes and heroines were real flesh and blood, ordinary men and women, and among them khaddar-clad satyagrahis, reformers, politicians and starving peasants living in dirty holes and ploughing fields to eke out a miserable living which, too, is denied them, for they always lose the "battle of life."

The introduction by Premchand of the theme of contemporary struggle of life brought the novel and short story into gear with life. From the stultifying atmosphere of the ivory tower, literature was transported into the free breezes of the village fields, or the hectic and atomistic life of cities. All the works of Premchand have a bearing on one or the other aspect of contemporary life; they deal with life; they are life.

His achievement, therefore, consisted in grasping the hand of literature, till now wallowing in a world dark and dingy, and dragging her out on to the threshold of a new and a better one—the world of Raymont and Mikhel Sholohov. Single-handed, he raised Hindustani literature to the level of the great literatures of the world.

Premchand's life harvest was rich.

I THE STREAM OF LIFE

A soft, kind expression, deep, dreamy eyes overshadowed by dark, hairy eyebrows, a crown of unruly, half-grey hair, thick, drooping moustaches. Wrinkles, a mark of suffering and toil, line his forehead and pale sunken cheeks. His fifty years have not been kind to him.

This man is very plain and simple. His medium-statured figure is clad in an open-necked khaddar *kurta*, with a patch on the right hand shoulder, and a clean, though dirty-looking, *dhoti*. He is not at all impressive.

Lying on his belly, his legs moving back and forth,, amidst books and magazines scattered all over the small room, the furniture of which consists of a charpoy and a wooden desk, so typical of the writer caste of India, he is enveloped in tobacco smoke from his *huqqa*.

Quite unmindful of the evening darkness that is descending, he is busy writing at a hectic speed. While his right hand scribbles, the left combs now his ruffled hair and now his brushy moustaches.

A diffident visitor, his mind wracked by such questions as "How shall I introduce myself?", "what would he look like?", "What should I talk to him?", stands at the door of the room where lies a pair of tattered shoes.

"Excuse me, I came to see Premchandji", he says to the man lying on the floor, doubting if he has come to the right place and to the right man.

"Surely, you won't meet him standing."

"But where is Premchandji?"

"I am Premchand", he replies, putting the pen against his ear and lying on his elbow, adding: "I am sorry if I have disappointed you."

"I am Mr. . .", the visitor says to introduce himself.

"I know. From. . . . Your short story published under the caption . . . last year was very good. The character of. . . was very well chiselled. But the plot was weak.. I hope you don't share the views of... They are too conservative."

The talk goes on, as if between two age-long friends.

punctuated by only the peels of laughter which seems to be the second nature of Premchand.

“ When did you arrive here ?”

“ Yesterday,” the visitor replies.

“ You should have come and stopped with me.”

The visitor is surprised at this affection and disarming love. But he finds that he, too, has come to have a love for him. He says : “ Munshiji, it is too late to be writing without a lamp. You are doing injustice to yourself and to the people you serve.”

“ The labourer must work to earn his living. I too am a labourer. The day when I don't work, I feel I have no right to eat.”

“ I hear that you are running ‘ Hans ’ and ‘ Jagaran at a great loss. If I were you, I would close them down.”

“ If you reason it out that way, there is no end to this line of argument. To-day you ask me to close down these magazines ; to-morrow you would ask me to give up writing. How far should I comply with your wishes I do not know.”

“ But why should you alone suffer ? This is painful penance.”

“ It is not. Suffering is bad when you feel the pinch of it”, says Premchand. “ To me it gives joy, and that

which gives joy cannot be penance; it is pleasure. Besides, Bhai Jan, money is not the be-all and the end-all of life. Man's duty is to elevate and emancipate the suffering humanity, unmindful of the sacrifice called for. Were it not so, what difference would there be between existence on human and animal planes. And the responsibilities of one who wields a powerful pen are out of all measure."

"Premchand" was, really speaking, the sobriquet which he used after 1912; previous to that year, he wrote under the nom-de-plume of "Nawab Rai," a name assumed because Dhanpat Rai—that was his real name—was addressed to by his father, out of affection, as "Nawab."

Dhanpat Rai Srivastava was born on August 10, 1881, in a small village, Mundhwa Lamhi, on the outskirts of Benares. The Srivastavas are a sub-caste of Kayasths, the professional writer caste. Hindus by birth, they are closer—closest among the Hindus—to the Muslims by culture, education and tradition (thanks to the close association of their ancestors with the Moghul Court).

In accordance with the age-old custom, young Premchand was sent to the typical village school, conducted by a Moulvi goldsmith by profession in the village mosque. A precocious child, he learnt Persian quickly.

His father, Ajaib Lal, had inherited a small piece of ancestral land. Finding the income too small, he joined the Post and Telegraph Department as an ill-paid clerk and rose to the position of a petty post-master of a petty post-office, getting forty rupees per mensem; and with him Premchand went from place to place and read in different schools.

But Premchand's real education was in the School of Life; he read the Book of Life; Suffering and Poverty were his great task masters.

When he was only seven, his mother died, leaving him to cherish her memories with great fondness; all over his works, we find light, tender, dignified and affectionate tributes to maternal love. She was a noble woman "just as affectionate and, when occasion arose, just as stern as all good mothers are". Her life of service and sacrifice went a long way in influencing Premchand's conception of woman.

On her death, Ajaib Lal re-married, and, by his untimely death, left to his penniless young son of fifteen not only the burden of supporting himself and paying his way towards education, but also of supporting a step-mother and two half-brothers, who survived Premchand.

That was not all. Ajaib Lal had committed another blunder. One year before his death, he had got Prem-

chand married to a girl who has been described as “unmannered and uncultured.” Premchand writes : “ She was an unfortunate woman, not at all good-looking, and, although not satisfied with her, I pulled on uncomplainingly. just as all traditional husbands do.”

The marriage proved an unqualified failure, and it was not long before young Mrs. Premchand left her husband, who, it must be added, sent her regularly a maintenance allowance that lay within his means for several years.

Ever an ailing child. Premchand grew into a far from robust youth. Ill-clad and ill-fed, he daily tramped over ten miles to earn a pittance of five rupees a month, and it was in such trying circumstances that he matriculated. Admission to College was refused to him, because he had got only a second division.

And this refusal came when he had pitched his ambitions too high : he aspired to take M. A. and LL.B. degrees—“ to climb the Everest, when his feet were chained to the earth down below.”

Clouds were now thickening. Leaner days were in store for Premchand. He started tuition work in Benares and himself cooked his meals. The spectre of starvation haunted daily. At times for days on end, he would not have a bite. It is an open secret that several times in his life (on account of poverty and frustration ?) he harbour-

ed ideas of suicide. One day, when, as his last resort, he was selling away a book to break his three-day involuntary fast, one needy headmaster took pity and employed him at eighteen rupees per mensem.

This was the first rung of the ladder. Gradually he rose, taking his Junior Teacher's Certificate and qualifying in Urdu and Hindi in 1904. Subsequently, he became a Sub-Deputy Inspector of Schools and in 1910 and 1919* respectively passed his F. A. and B. A. examinations privately.

In 1905, Premchand was young. His first wife had left him, perhaps through no fault of his. He was now employed, too. Pressure was put on him by his people to marry a second time. He had had no romance. for he says : " I had had no love affair. Life was so engrossing, and bread-winning such a tough job, that it left no scope for romance." He consented to re-marry, but put an "unprecedented" condition—namely that he would marry none save a widow. This was done on a point of principle. He succeeded.

By marrying a child widow. it is said, at great risk to his own life, he not only alienated several friends and relations, but lost the customary dowry worth a few thousand rupees—a commodity he needed so badly.

This second marriage, however, proved a great success.

Shiv Rani Devi, a lady as noble as Premchand, proved a very faithful companion. She bore him three sons and one daughter. Out of the two surviving sons, the elder, Shri Sripat Rai, runs the Saraswati Press, and the younger, Shri Amrit Rai, is the editor of "Hans".

Junior Mrs. Premchand, who has outlived her husband, is a great woman. She courted imprisonment in non-co-operation movement and has become, from almost an illiterate girl, a writer of no mean merit. She is the author of over half a dozen books of short stories. Doubtless, it was the inevitable result of close proximity with and inspiration from Premchand.

Premchand took to writing as a duck takes to water. At the age of thirteen, the love affair of a distant uncle became the theme of a very good skit; at fourteen, he wrote a little drama called *Honahar Birwan ke Chikne Chikne Pat*. His first novel was written when he was nineteen.

Part of his urge for writing must be ascribed to his vast reading. He was a voracious reader and read indiscriminately whatever came his way. While still a student in the seventh standard at Gorakhpur, one of his closest associates tells us, he read, behind huge black mounds of smoking tobacco, *Tilism-i-Hosh-e-Ruba*, *Chahar Darvish* and similar interminable and

encyclopaedic romantic literature. Translations of Reynold's were also popular. Enveloping in clouds of smoke, he would lose himself in rapturous ecstasies over these tales of adventures. When these were finished, he read translations of Puranas and Upnishads.

At Benares, he read *Fisana-i-Azad* and writings of Babu Devaki Nandan Khatri. While these works gave him fluency and brilliant powers of description, his later readings of Scott, Thackeray, Dickens, Hugo, Tolstoy, Tagore and Romain Rolland, and travel books widened his intellectual horizon.

A very potent influence on Premchand was the Indian National Congress, founded four years after his birth. The extremist section gradually gathered strength and, thanks to the partition of Bengal and Lord Curzon's highly centralized and autocratic rule, the "rebellious" elements dominated the Indian stage. At Benares, Premchand's home, they sanctioned in 1905 the boycott of foreign-made goods.

About this time, in 1908, we find Premchand writing articles in the *Zamana* of Cawnpore, a magazine, the editor of which, Daya Narain Nigam, became a life-long friend and quasi-brother to Premchand. These articles appeared under the name of "Nawab Rai", a name common to Hindus and Muslims, and were on various subjects. The list is significant: "How to encourage

indigenous industries ? ” “ The Turkish Constitution ”, “ Education in U.P. ”, “ History of Indian Railways ”, “ Obstacles in the Success of National Movement ”

He also wrote notes and comments in the *Zamana* and soon took to writing short biographical sketches of great men of India and abroad : Raja Man Singh, Ranjit Singh, Gokhale, Dr. Bhandarkar, Reynold, Garibaldi, Bhartendu Harishchandra, Kalidas. Vivekananda.

In 1907 appeared his first short story. *Duniya Ka Sab Se Anmol Ratan*, the theme being that the most valuable thing in the world is the drop of blood shed in defence of motherland. It was followed by several others which aroused in the readers a passion for independence.

A collection of five short stories was published by the *Zamana* in 1907 under the name of *Sauz-e-Watan*. A noble spirit of patriotism pervades all of them. But by no means are they revolutionary. They also show to-day what progress India has made. Then Premchand was confronted with a panicky bureaucracy dependent on steel-frame methods. Suppression was supreme all over the country. The British Collector of Hamirpur, in Bundelkhand, where Premchand was employed as S. D. I. of Schools, publicly burned 500 copies that the author possessed.

Premchand extricated himself with difficulty. But

he was cut to the quick, and it is certain that if he had had independent means to fall upon he would have resigned his job. He came to nourish a positive hatred against the British bureaucracy. He reciprocated their policy of isolation and once chastised a friend for inviting British officials to a marriage party, because "it was not in keeping with national honour"!

Instructions were issued by the Education Department to "Nawab Rai" not to write anything on any subject, without the Department's previous permission, and also to submit it for scrutiny before sending it up for publication.

But who has dammed the flood or mastered the storm? "Nawab Rai" died and Dhanpat Rai became "Premchand." His stories continued.

He decided to create pride in a despondent nation, and for this he turned to the rich and inspiring past of India. At this time he was serving in Bundelkhand, and the bravery of Rajputs and Budelas—men and women—forms the theme of many a story. There are also high-class romances, coloured in ideal love. Incidents in Mughal history provided other themes.

About this time, he came into contact with a writer of note, who pressed him to switch over from the Persian to the Devnagari script. Premchand knew both very well; he had passed the Vernacular examination in both

in 1904 and his first novel was in the Devnagari script. But so far he had written mostly in the Persian script, although that section of the reading public gave him only condescending patronage.

As a matter of fact, the Muslims in those days thought that a Hindu could not write Urdu of any merit. In this connection a term of sneer and satire, *Bu-e-Kachori*, became current in those days. Premchand's short stories, translated by his friends into the Devnagari script Hindustani, became very popular. This vast section of the reading public hailed him as a master-writer, and much better payments were offered to him. Naturally, he was attracted to Hindustani in the the Devnagari script. He never, however, completely broke away from the Persian script. Novels and collections of his short stories appeared both in the Devnagari and Persian scripts.

In 1914, appeared "Sevasadan", his first mature novel, which gave him a lasting place in Hindustani literature. It took the country by storm and announced the birth of a literary force in India.

While he was in Bundelkhand, Premchand contracted an acute form of dysentery which re-appeared in 1936, resulting in his early death.

For reasons of health, he got himself transferred

from Mahoba to Basti in July, 1914. A year later he gave up his travelling duties and became an assistant teacher in the Basti school, a job which he left in August, 1918, to become an assistant in the Normal School, Gorakhpur. This place he left to join the first non co-operation movement.

Right from his childhood, Premchand had nourished very independent ideas. With the advance of years, these made greater inroads on his life, and he became more and more a "man of action". Temperamentally he belonged to the extremist section of the National Congress—at its Surat session, he voted for the extremist Tilak and not the moderate Gokhale. He chafed under subordination to a foreign government. There was fever in his blood.

When Premchand was at Gorakhpur a new storm swept over India. Political passions rose high. There was thunder in the air. Came the bureaucratic suppression and the popular resistance to suppression. Premchand would no longer sell his soul for a mess of pottage. Gandhiji's speech at Gorakhpur in February, 1921, decided him. The former's magnetic personality won him over. He says : "When I saw him, I felt myself as if a dead man had come to life again." Before the third day was out, he had submitted his resignation.

Premchand was attracted to Gandhiji for more than

one reason—the Mahatma's passion for independence, a pride in India's glorious past, an attachment to the soil, the peasant and the underdog, the noble doctrines of truth, ahimsa, self-sacrifice, suffering, ceaseless work and an unshakable faith in the essential nobility of Man. ✓ He was a true Satyagrahi and, like Gandhiji, believed in the magnanimity and trusteeship of the capitalists and the zamindars and harboured a hatred against machinery and industrialism. He believed in compromise, as is evident from the idealistic end of "Premashram," or *Gosha-i-Afiat*. "Rangabhumi," or *Chaugan-i-Hasti*, "Kayakalp," or *Parda-i-Majaz*, "Karmabhumi," or *Maidan-i-Amal*—books which came out at intervals of two to three years each. §

Besides, he was a pacifist. During the Great War of 1914-18, he refused to serve on a committee proposed to carry on propaganda against the enemy. Indeed, he always hated being associated with the bureaucracy. He wrote to Daya Narain Nigam : "The headmastership of a non-Governmental school, the editorship of a good paper which should champion the cause of the peasant and some service in the national cause—that is the goal of my life" (July, 1918)).

The key-note of all Premchandian literature is genuine sympathy for peasants. With their lives he ostensibly identified himself. "I am not a Raizada,"

he often remarked. "Why should I keep up false appearances?"

That is one reason why he was unimpressive and unassuming. He was shy and scores of stories are told how even his next-door neighbour was not acquainted with him. Those who were thick with him were few.

He indulged only in two luxuries: one was care-free laughter and the other poverty. The former brought him several nicknames, like "Bambook", from his friends, for he beat them all at this game. It was characteristic of the outdoor breezes of the village.

Premchand was always skipping half a step ahead of bankruptcy. Even when his health was shattered, he could not go to hill stations, for he had no money to take his family, which he could not leave behind to starve, even at the height of his career. He was invited to Santiniketan, but he could not visit the university for the same reason. Even on his death-bed he felt qualms of conscience to take orange juice, because he could not forget the starving millions of India. The following words written to Chaturvedi are significant:

"I cannot imagine a great man rolling in wealth. The moment I see a rich man, all his words of art and wisdom are lost upon me. He appears to me to have submitted to the present social order, which is based on exploitation of the poor by the rich...I am glad

Nature and Fortune have helped me and my lot has been cast with the poor."

Equally significant is his advice to the would-be writers : " For those who have wealth and power, there is no place in the temple of literature. Only those devotees need enter, who have identified their lives with service, who have a bleeding heart fired by true Love. True service gives us mental satisfaction. And that in itself is our guerdon. . . . We are the standard-bearers, the advanceguard of society. Simple living and high thinking are the aims of our lives. The true artist can't be the lover of the selfish in life. He needs no show, no artificiality. No, he hates them."

Although Premchand never courted imprisonment, at times he felt the urge for it. When Mrs. Moti Lal Nehru was beaten with lathis, he wrote to Mr. Nigam : " Now this oppression is taking its worst form. It seems disgraceful for me to be out of jail. None can be sure of the morrow. You might see me in ".

By himself he was a living embodiment of his ideals. Through suffering and poverty, he chastened his soul. To-day he remains an ideal to live up to. Listen to his ambitions in 1930 : "At present my supreme desire is that we should be successful in our struggle for independence. Fame and gold do not tempt me. Somehow I get enough to keep myself going. More than that—for a

house, a motor-car—I aspire not . . . Of course I very much desire to write a few top-notch books. But their aim, too, is the achievement of freedom. . . I desire no rest. I must be doing something or other in the cause of the country and literature for her freedom.”

To another friend he wrote : “ Well, life has been always to me work, work, work. Even when I was in Government service, I devoted my whole time to literary pursuits. I find pleasure in work.”

The whilom teacher worked like a clock and daily got up early in the morning. It came as a great surprise to his friends in Delhi when they were told that for 31 years of his literary life not a day had passed when he had not done writing work.

After Premchand resigned his job, a few years before retirement with a pension, he opened a charkha shop, but soon gave it up. Then for some time he served in the Marwari School in Cawnpore. His old ambition of owning a press, however, asserted itself. This, he thought, would give him financial stability and thus free him to devote himself whole-heartedly to his literary pursuits. Thus came into existence the Saraswati Press, wherein he invested all his lifelong savings, as also his friends’ money.

The press, however, proved a liability and Premchand was forced to seek other sources of income to make up the loss. He served as editor of “ Maryada ” and as

Principal of Kashi Vidyapith. He resigned the Principalship because he thought his monthly pay of Rs. 125 was beyond the financial means of the Vidyapith. Later he served on the editorial staff of "Madhuri", and in the Nawalkishore Press of Lucknow, wrote books for school children and translated into Hindi books such as Galsworthy's "Silver Box", "Strife", and "Justice", Anatole France's "Thais", Sarshar's *Fisana-i-Azad* Tolstoy's stories, Eliot's "Silas Mariner", Shaw's "Methuselah".

As work was not to be had for the press, Premchand started "Hans" in 1930. Three years later, he bought out "Jagaran". Both the journals set a high standard in Hindi journalism and in low price; for Premchand wanted them to be magazines for the masses.

Premchand's finances were hopelessly managed. Any Tom, Dick or Harry, with the slightest show of affection and a cleverly put case, could get any amount of money, provided Premchand had it. Besides, he could secure no advertisements for his journals; he lacked business acumen.

The "Hans" and "Jagaran", in their turn, proved a great liability. Premchand lost in journalism what he had earned by his works. All told, his loss totalled Rs. 15,000.

To make up this loss, he went to the Ajanta Cinetone

Company, Bombay, to write scenerios for them. Early in the thirties, the Lakshmi Cinetone Ltd. had screened his "Sevasadan," but the film had proved a miserable failure. Premchand was himself disappointed. The Ajanta Cinetone produced "Mazdoor", "Navjivan" and *Sher dil Aurat*. In "Mazdoor", he himself played the role of a Union President, the role of a reconciler—a part he was temperamently best suited for. The picture was an unmerited failure. His social themes were always rejected by the directors who never gave him a free hand and always played havoc with his manuscripts.

Premchand and the cinema were poles apart. He had looked on it from another angle. Here he found that he had to place all his idealism in cold storage. The director was all in all; he was the only judge of the public needs; he regarded the cinema as an industry with responsibility to none; vulgarity passed for entertainment; he aimed at the maximum of returns and the minimum of investment. To that end he provided sensations and pandered to the lower instincts of man by public dancing, kissing, infliction of injuries, public assault on women and rape, bloodshed and murder. This was far from Premchand's dreams, for ideas of lust and cruelty were foreign to him. In disgust, he gave it up and went back to Benares to devote his last two years to literary work.

Judging from his dramas, one might easily say he

totally lacked vision and imagination. All his dramas, "*Karbala*", "*Sangram*", "*Prem-ki-Bedi*" and *Ruhani Shadi*, remained only reading dramas, ostensibly because no dramatic technique or stagecraft has been evolved in Northren India; thus he worked under great handicaps. In one of his stories, "*Demonstration*", he has recounted how difficult it is to write dramas, but in his letters from Bombay he showed his determination to write a few. Fate, however, willed otherwise. The icy hand of death fell too soon.

A few years before his death, an effort was made, particularly by his close associates, Shri Jainendra Kumar among them, to draw him into some of the literary societies and shower honours, which were his due. He came, but not without protests. In his inaugural address at the first Progressive Writers' Conference in Lucknow in April, 1936, he gave expression to his reflections on the functions of literature and responsibilities of the litterateur. This admirable exposition, the first and the only exposition coming in Hindustani, can be a manifesto for all writers in India.

He was a mere spectator, although he gave all these societies his best. Soon he was fed up with their "higher politics" about offices, usually so intriguing and corrupt.

Premchand was a no-party man. He sympathised

with the Congress cause and its ideals, only because it upheld the cause of the suffering and the starving peasant and propagated Hindu-Muslim harmony. He had supported the Ali Brothers' policy and appreciated the genuine efforts by the Muslims to bring the untouchables out of the slough of degradation in which they have been, and are still, wallowing. But he condemned conversion for materialistic ends as a political weapon. The selfless sacrifice of Hassan and Hussain at Karbala inspired him and he wrote, in the face of bitter opposition from Muslims, "*Karbala*", for he thought it would bring the Hindus and the Muslims, on the one hand, and the Shias and the Sunnies, on the other, nearer. Its aim was political. He wrote to Jainendra Kumar in 1933: "What has happened to Mr.——? He has written the 'Poison-tree of Islam.' You write a suitable criticism of the book; a fitting reply must be given. Thus communal propaganda has got to be opposed tooth and nail." At heart he was a no-religion man; he was a human being and looked upon others only from that angle.

He was the ambassador of unity: he preached reconciliation and amity even in the darkest days of communalism. Fearlessly and boldly, he exposed the hypocrisies of all parties, thus alienating many people.

The same was true about the Hindi-Urdu question. Not only as a thinker, writer and educationalist, but also

as a patriot, he advocated Hindustani as the *lingua franca* of India. Through it, he wanted to deepen the unity of the nation. He always looked upon the problem from the point of view of the masses, for true literature must serve the masses. And for the masses there is only one language—Hindustani. Its Sankritized and Persianized forms, Hindi and Urdu, exist merely so far as the “upper classes” are concerned.

Fortunately for India, Premchand was born and brought up in a village, and he imbibed the true atmosphere of rural India. This gave him a wealth of impressions and associations, which have enriched Hindustani and simplified it for the masses. He took it out of the towns and cities to the villages.

For this synthesis, by simplification, of Urdu and Hindi into Hindustani, he started “Hans”. It was also to be the cornerstone of a national literature. It was to be the medium of inter-provincial exchange of thought and literature, for herein the reader could find the best of all languages—Tamil, Telugu, Kanarese, Marathi, Gujerati, Bengali, Malayalam, Hindi and Urdu.

The “Hans” ran for five years, when it was taken up by the Bhartiya Sahitya Parishad. For some time it was under the joint editorship of K. M. Munshi and Premchand. Differences, however, arose between the Parishad and Premchand on sundry matters. Happily

the Government demand of a fresh security from "Hans", on the appearance of a story with a seditious colouring, decided the matter. "Hans" was discontinued by the Parishad. Premchand, who loved "Hans" as his own child, decided to continue it and deposited the security on his own account. But before the first number was out, Premchand had closed his eyes in eternal sleep, on October 8, 1936.

The differences between Premchand and the Parishad have been traced by certain people to the Hindi-Urdu controversy, referred to above. When this controversy was switched over from a literary to a communal and political plane, so as to threaten the unity of the nation, Premchand was deeply pained.

He pursued his path of truth, reconciliation and *via media*, and, as a result, lost favour with both sides. Venomous attacks were made on him by individuals and institutions. He bore himself bravely and nobly. He was born to give and thank. To ask for returns was not in him. He could not reproach; he could not hate; Premchand could only love.

II THE POLE STAR

The nineteenth century witnessed in India the birth of unprecedented social, religious, intellectual and literary forces. Raja Ram Mohan Roy and the Brahmo Samaj, Swami Dayananda Saraswati and the Arya Samaj, Madame Blavatsky and the Theosophical Society, Ramakrishna Parmahansa and his energetic disciple, Vivekananda, constituted the advanceguard of these forces. All these gigantic personalities and institutions advocated radical changes in the Indian religious and social fabric. A vehement cry was raised for the abolition of child marriage and purdah, for the emancipation of untouchables, for the re-marriage of Hindu widows and for the assertion of women's rights.

These forces resulted in a great intellectual transformation. A new consciousness grew in the masses. The yearning for political independence became strong, and the Indian National Congress was founded in 1885. Originally a party of the British Government in India,

within a couple of years it assumed the note of a conscious opposition to the bureaucracy. Extremism gathered strength and, eventually, inundated the political field.

Before the determined will of individuals, or groups of individuals, fired by new ideals, antiquated laws and conventions were melting away ; social and moral values were being challenged. The old order was changing, yielding place to new.

Such was the time when Premchand came on to the literary stage. Not only did these new ideas and ideals not leave him unaffected, but in course of time he became their voice.

Technically speaking, we have no sanction whatsoever to identify the views of a writer with those of his characters. But when there are persistent repetitions of the same ideas by characters in book after book we can safely presume the earnestness of the author and the identity of his views with those of his mouthpieces. The writings of every writer are, in a way, autobiographical.

Genteel poverty, an unhappy marriage and frustrations in life developed in Premchand what subsequently became the most marked characteristic of his works—a burning zest for economic, social and political justice. His passionate narratives betray a truly burning soul.

After a process of keen observation, deep and

thorough reflection, Premchand revolted against the existing system based upon exploitation of the poor and subjected to a foreign political domination.

With the lower order, the peasant and the underdog, he found no fault. They are the victims of a tyrannous and heartless bureaucracy and a usurious middle class.

Premchand thought that the middle class in India, the result of the impact of the West, was thoroughly corrupt, that it depended for its safety upon foreign bayonets and that its standards of moral and social values were entirely false, enveloped in artificiality and show. Against the manifold ills of this social order and its mainstay, the modern educational system, Premchand carries on a crusade.

His was a very sensitive and receptive mind, immediately getting indignant at any sort of injustice. The position of woman in Indian society is an instance.

The understanding of his attitude to love, marriage, woman and her right place in society will go a long way towards enabling an easy comprehension of his works, for his attitude towards these problems, typically in line with Indian traditions, remained consistent from his first published novel, "Prema" (1904), to his last, "Godan" (1936), and from his first short story, published in 1907, to his last "Do Bahnen" (1936).

He always championed woman's rights, and his indignation at the iniquitous position of woman in Indian society forms the main theme of several of his stories and is touched upon in almost all his novels. He carried on a war on behalf of widows and advocated their remarriage. The problem, in his opinion, was capable of an easy solution, if only the widowers decided to marry only widows.

Much more pungent is his criticism of the system which is responsible for misfit unions by selling away young and innocent girls to aged but wealthy widowers. It always results in unhappiness for the whole family, and, often, the consequences prove fatal. To the motherless child the existence of a step-mother means the father's death too. Such children abound in Premchand's works. Incidentally, we might mention there are few happy couples in Premchand's works.

The Indian woman is a slave all her life. As a child she is a domestic servant, an unwelcome burden to be cast away by the parents at the earliest opportunity; in her youth, she is a slave to the whims and caprices of the husband and a hostile mother-in-law; in her old age, she is at the mercy of her sons.

From beginning to end, her life is a tragedy—a tragedy without relief. Premchand sheds tears of blood.

What, then, is the solution? A wholesale imitation of the Western system—equality of woman and man, the right of divorce, the right of vote, marriage by courtship and free love? Premchand's reply is an emphatic "No."

The bitterest critic of all undesirable conventions in our society, he admitted that injustice had been done to woman in India, but he issued a warning against blind imitation of the West. The reason for this was not because he was opposed to exchange of ideas between different cultures and civilizations. Far from that. He advocated taking all but the bad features from the West. What he really opposed was taking their worst and giving up our best. He saw very many good points in the old order sanctified by the lives of our ancestors, and merely pleaded for not condemning it in its entirety without a hearing. In an effort to do away with the injustice by wholesale importation of Western ideals, the Indian woman was likely, in his opinion, to lose her individuality. And that was a high price to pay.

Woman's demand for equality is a trap and that for the vote a snare, merely a device to sidetrack her. In the West, Premchand thought, it had resulted in woman's right to smoke and drink alcohol with men at the same table. "Her so-called freedom has resulted in an aggravated form of slavery—slavery to passion and, therefore, to man."

“Courtship is no solution for unhappy marriages. Despite all courtship and free intercourse, divorces are not uncommon in Europe and America”, he wrote. “And when it is not a certainty that (it) will cure all our nuptial ills, I don’t want to fasten this unnecessary evil. The demand for divorce without any provision for the poor wife is made only by morbid individualism ... there is no place for it in a society based on real equality. Marriage, even at its best, is a sort of compromise and surrender. If a couple mean to be happy, they must be ready to make allowances. One of the couple must be ready to bend—whether it is the male or female does not matter.”

Woman is the pivotal point, the sheet-anchor of a happy domestic life—the only foundation of a stable social order. She is the bedrock of society. Far from being the equal of man, she is his superior. Her responsibilities are truly gigantic, because she holds the privileged position of mother.

Premchand always saw the mother in woman, for in her capacity of a mother she is capable of great self-denial and self-sacrifice. And so firmly was this idea rooted in his mind that, like some other great men, Rousseau and Havelock Ellis among them, he often addressed his own wife as “mother”, because she would sacrifice for her husband what only a mother could do

for her child. Woman, therefore, is not only a wife to a man. At times she is a mother, too. And whenever Premchand saw the mother in woman asserting, he simply wept with joy.

Shri Jainendra Kumarji has recorded an interesting incident which throws a powerful light on Premchand's conception of mother in woman. Once the latter was reading Alexander Kuprin's *Yama, the Pit. Janochka*, the prostitute, who takes revenge on society which is responsible for her degradation by deliberately infecting thousands of young men with the scourge—the "social disease" she is suffering from. When, however, she faces a handsome young man from the army, whom she sincerely loves, the mother in her asserts itself and in so many words she, in spite of herself, tells him of this and bids him go away.

Recounting this incident, Premchand was carried away by emotion, by the magnanimity, the inherent greatness of woman, her superiority over man. Tears came to his eyes; he perspired. His face became red; contortions disfigured it. For more than two minutes, he became speechless.

To sum up, his ideal of woman is "sacrifice, service, and purity—all rolled into one. Sacrifice without end, service always ungrudging and purity as that of Caesar's wife beyond reproach."

About chastity of woman he was very scrupulous; he could never think of lust or sex as such. Whenever some female character's chastity is violated, he loses no time in diverting our attention to the brighter side of her character. Woman is essentially noble. Not a single female character is thoroughly dark.

All these noble qualities of self-denial, self-sacrifice, self-control, and the capacity to rise to super-human heights when occasion demands, are typical of the Indian woman. When she finds her husband in trouble, she would sacrifice her all. And, for this reason, Premchand had nothing but praise for her. "Only India has produced Sita and Savitri. Is there another to be found in all Virgil, Homer, Hugo, Shakespeare, Goethe or Dante?"

These, then, are the premises from which he starts and warns woman against losing these great qualities in her race with man. Without mercy, he assaults all iniquities. He condemns the dowry system, the huge expenditure on marriage, the convention of looking down on daughters and favouring sons.

Ever a reformer, he assaulted the problem of prostitution, which he traced to a thoroughly unhealthy social system. He speaks through one of his characters: "We have no right to look down upon prostitutes as fallen creatures. It is the

height of shame-facedness. Day in and day out, we accept bribes; we receive interest at exorbitant rates; we suck the blood of the poor; we cut the throat of the hapless. Surely we are the most fallen, the greatest sinners, the most evilly disposed and unjust. We who think ourselves to be educated, civilized, cultured, enlightened and 'of the classes' have no right, no justification whatsoever to look down upon any stratum of society. Thanks to the patronage of our enlightened brethren, there is life in Dal Mandi*, there is gaiety in Chowk* and bustle in brothels. It is we who have decorated this beauty exhibition; it is we who have caged these lovely sparrows; it is we who are the makers of these puppets. (Indeed, in a society which puts premium, honours and respects the tyrannous landlord, the corrupt official, the cantankerous money-lender, the selfish relatives and friends, Dal Mandi is bound to prosper. And why shouldn't it be so? How else could ill-gotten money be spent, save in questionable channels? The day when the system of bribes, presents and compound interest ceases to exist, Dal Mandi would be deserted, these sparrows will fly away. But not before."

The two greatest victims of this exploitation are untouchables and peasants, for both of whom Premchand has real and genuine sympathy. He cried out in

* Prostitute quarters in Benares.

anguish at the miseries of the larger humanity which is ground down to poverty and starvation. Their groans he could not bear.

In the wake of the last Great War came widespread economic distress. The burden on the ryot increased and became unbearable. He rose in "revolt" and this "revolt" ultimately merged into the political struggle started by the Congress. In the United Provinces, distress raised its head in the acutest form, the movement starting in districts with which Premchand was familiar and where he had served. As a consequence, the impact on his mind was great.

Under the present capitalistic system, the conditions of existence of the peasant, who creates wealth, are very harsh and full of drama. He fights against the inclemencies of nature and the unkindness of his fellow beings. He is also, according to Premchand, the victim of an oppressive bureaucracy, the rapacious zamindar, the usurious moneylender and the hypocritical priest. All these forces join hands to grind down the hapless peasant to a living death. Poverty-stricken, ill-clad, he lives in filthy fox-holes, faced with starvation, ignorance and illness. His future is ever dark; every to-morrow is dreadful; the spectre of death beckons to him. Premchand felt all this so much that he lost faith in the existence of a kind and fatherly personal God.

He advocated the peasant's cause for freedom from want. So long as the exploitation of the poor peasant went on, he did not worry whether it was called independence, democracy or dictatorship. If freedom merely meant the replacement of the "white" master by the "black", Premchand would rather go without it.

His yardstick of progress and freedom was the measure of freedom of the peasant from want and fear. The peasant's cell of virtual life imprisonment, he said, must be broken.

Premchand rejected the 1919 Reforms not because this party or that rejected it, but because it did not affect the peasant. The peasant's exploitation went on as before—and it goes on to-day just as well.

For the same reason, Premchand placed no faith in Councils and Executive Advisers, who are mere puppets in the hands of the Government, which appeases only the vociferous elements—at the cost of the peasant. The only organisation which upheld their cause was the Congress, and therefore Premchand supported it.

This social system based on economic exploitation, with the help of a foreign bureaucracy, he said, needed a thorough shake-up. How was it to be achieved—through a violent revolution, as in Russia, or through pacifist

Gandhian methods ? Replying to this, Premchand wrote to a critic :

“ Revolution is the failure of saner methods. What fate it may lead to is doubtful. It may lead us to worse forms of dictatorship, denying all personal liberty.

“ I do want to overhaul, but not to destroy. If I had prescience and knew that destruction would lead to heaven, I would not mind destroying even.

“ I believe in social evolution—our object being to educate public opinion. For it is the people’s character that is the deciding factor. No social system can flourish unless we are individually uplifted.....”

Premchand was a reformer first and an artist next. An independent, though at times loose, thinker and an advocate of the positive values in life, he turned from the romantic in life to the naked realities. He very soon arrived at the conclusion that the crying needs of the masses did not justify placing at their disposal sentimental stuff or providing them with senseless sensations.

The conscientious artist, according to him, must sympathise with the oppressed and the suffering and he must criticise the injustice to which they are subjected, thus to intensify their hatred against injustice.

Because of his hyper-sensitive temperament, the artist

and the writer feels the injustice more intensely. In spite of himself, he becomes the voice of the victims, and, with a mastery of words, unlike others, he gives expression to it with a hundred-fold force.

At a literary gathering, Premchand uttered very significant words, which echo through all his works :

“ He is no litterateur whose soul remains unruffled ; whose heart does not cry out ; who does not rise to put an end to all injustice. . . . In a State where a handful of men hold power ; where Mammon is worshipped ; where the fulfilment of false religious conventions gives merit to man and satisfies his vanity ; where success is counted in terms of bank-balances and property ; where the clever cheat eclipses the honest worker ; where religion has degenerated into segregation of men into water-tight compartments ; where to kill another man brings religious merit—is there a soul which can maintain its composure ? If there is one, it cannot be a litterateur’s.”

The literary artist cannot exist in a vacuum. He must see life, play with life and be played about. Life is the only foundation of literature and true literature transforms life. In no case must the litterateur flee from life.

This view of Premchand is beautifully explained by his attitude towards poetry. He could not stand poetry of self-indulgence, because it transports us from realities to a realm of phantasy. It provides only an

escape and keeps the artist confined in an ivory tower—remote from the scene of action. Poetry, in Premchand's opinion, should give strength and self-confidence to men ; it must help them to come to grips with life.

Iqbal of all the poets attracted him, because of the formers's modernity of themes having a bearing on the contemporary life. He quoted at great length from Iqbal's Persian and Urdu verses. In a letter to Syed Imtiaz Ali Taj, he quotes verses of Iqbal which, he says, he has been repeating all the day through.

On another occasion, criticising a friend's poetry, he wrote to him :

“ I can not approve of effeminacy, in whatever form it may present itself. That's why I can't like certain of Tagore's poems. Perhaps it is my weakness. But I can't help it. Only those verses appeal to me wherein there is depth and intensity of feeling (and a pain for the oppressed humanity). I want to see literature masculine.”

True literature, he held, never destroys. It always builds—it builds a nation's character ; it evolves culture ; it unravels our mental knots ; it sets ideals for society. And the rise of ideals means the uplift of a nation, for in the absence of ideals a society does not take long to fall.

Mention must be made of the two schools in literature : the Realist and the Idealist.

In his inaugural address at the First Progressive Writers' Conference at Lucknow in April, 1936, Premchand threw light on this subject at great length.

To err is human, he pointed out. Everyone of us has defects and weaknesses. Even the sun has spots. Realism is the truest picture of our weaknesses, our defects and our morbidness. And by portraying those defects in the darkest colours, so that man may feel repulsion from them, it dissolves faith in the essential goodness of man. It makes us pessimistic and leads to darkness. And what save darkness can we see in darkness ? Realism can only retard life.

What helps life is idealism. It urges us to leave the suffocating darkness and to go out into the fresh air of the garden. It brings out the best in man and creates in him a faith—a confidence. We cannot raise a man higher by merely exposing his weaknesses. By dubbing a man coward, we thrust him down ; we increase his inferiority complex. It's only by demonstrating to him that he has within him latent courage and powers—great reservoirs of strength—that we can raise him from the quagmire.

Nevertheless, in idealism there is the danger of being

cut off from the realities of life. A pure idealist like Shelley is a misfit in society. Once Premchand wrote to Shri Jainendra Kumarji, a thorough-going idealist :

“ It is true that the sparrow flies high up in the sky. But to feed itself it comes down to the earth.”

What Premchand advocated, therefore, was practical idealism or realistic idealism. We should go far, he said, but never too far to be cut off from our moorings. Only that writer succeeds who brings about a subtle fusion of idealism and realism.

The responsible litterateur has a duty to perform—to enable men to find their true selves, to accelerate the evolution of life. He is inspired by high and noble ideals of love and service. He dispels away the clouds of mutual distrust and misgiving, to create a healthy atmosphere in the country—conducive to progress in every walk of life. The litterateur is the advanceguard of every nation and, instead of being led by the politicians, he actually leads them.

Premchand, without following any school or group, preached Hindu-Muslim unity and, like the great unifiers, Kabir, Nanak and Gandhi, helped to bring them closer.

Because of his radical views on literature, as progressive as of the Russian writers, certain critics have expressed the opinion that Premchand's works constitute propaganda and not literature.

Their criticism is unjustified in so far as they forget that the artist can never keep himself aloof from his surroundings. His works, of necessity, bear the imprint of the times. If that constitutes propaganda, the greatest authors of all ages, and Galsworthy, Huxley, Gorki, G. B. Shaw, H. G. Wells, Tolstoy and Romain Rolland in our own day, are all propagandists.

And what after all is propaganda? It is literature in favour of new ideas and ideals, yet to be accepted. Conversely, literature is propaganda in favour of ideals with the stamp of acceptance.

Premchand was a writer with a purpose and wanted to train the masses for a struggle. To that end his works abound in heroes and patriots, inspired by noble ideals, loving, truthful, sacrificing, and always upholding the cause of the oppressed.

Before we illustrate all these tendencies given above in his novels and short stories, it seems only fair to say something about his art of writing, or technique.

Besides highly idealistic characters, we come across, in his works, an extraordinary exuberance of them. All sorts of men and women, from all walks of life and from all denominations, flit across the stage of tens of thousands of pages that he has written. His field is very wide and envelops the entire society.

Premchand's characterisation is very vivid. He

used the writer's pen like the painter's brush, and had a poet's heart ; with a few bold and dignified strokes, he created characters whom we feel to have known for ages and whom we can never forget. By all standards, it is first rate.

The characters are not toys of dreamland ; they are true to life. Indeed, therein consists Premchand's art. They are always men and women of flesh and blood. Neither of the tribe of God, nor that of Satan, they have, in them, both the virtues and the failings of Man ; they arouse in us the same emotions as they themselves experience ; they share our thoughts and anxieties ; their frustrations and aspirations are our own—so much so that we feel as if they were our enemies and friends. With them we laugh and we weep ; we rejoice in their triumphs and sympathise in their failures, for these triumphs and sorrows are not only theirs, but also ours. This is particularly true about his characters which spring from the middle and the lower classes.

These characters are dynamic beings, in the sense that they react to things in life in accordance with their mental constitutions and environments ; they behave differently under the impact of different circumstances ; they shape the events and are themselves shaped by the events, which throw a flood of light on those characters ; with the progress of time, the habits and manners of the characters, too, change, for they are always growing.

A marked characteristic of Premchand's characters is that, like Dickens's, they are always "types," and not "individuals", unlike Thackeray's. They are merely plant tools for Premchand to portray a whole society. If you study one character thoroughly, you know everything about the stratum from which it springs.

To achieve the object of an extraordinarily realistic picture, Premchand takes the help of various factors which fall within the technique of fiction writing.

His narration is vigorous and vivid. He uses the sweeping, or the panoramic, method of narration. Endowed with an imaginative mind as he was, he made full use of these powers. Every scene is written with the greatest care. Details add to the life of his writings and his field is wide enough to cover Princes' pleasure-houses and beggars' huts. The atmosphere created is exactly like the setting or background in a painting. The stage, in most cases, is the village, the actor is the peasant and nature the background.

Premchand's narration is interspersed with his own observations, which sometimes become unnecessary ramblings. Nevertheless, they are, usually, interesting and full of deep reflections.

The chief vehicle of a realistic characterisation is a lively and spontaneous dialogue; it accelerates action, advances the narrative, reveals character, builds up

setting, or background, of the story ; it gives an air of leisureliness and spontaneity to the narrative. The more the dialogue, the truer the characterisation.

In Premchand's works, dialogue is the soul. To him it provides full scope for his abundant humour and pungent irony. Scattered all over his works, we find debates and delightful discussions. Humour, is all-pervading and transfigures all his works.

The dialogues are indigenous to the soil ; they are not laboured. Premchand has used the popular language of the masses. At times too much of the dialect enables him to draw the sense of the ludicrous, a cry of the untranslatable pain and his own indignation at the disturbing jet of poverty. It adds to the vigour of expression. It is a sort of an Aerial to a Prospero, always ready to do the master's bidding.

One very striking fact about Premchand's use of dialogue is that he uses it in such a way that it always befits the station in life of every character. While his Pandits use Sanskritised Hindustani and his Muslim characters and Moulvis use Persianised Hindustani, his characters educated on Western models intersperse their Hindustani with English words and it is not uncommon to find his Bengali characters using a Europeanised Hindustani. This imparts life to his works.

Premchand always used dialogue prudently and effectively. When his characters were other than rustics, the language was lucid, clear and pure in diction. Indeed, his one aim in the use of dialogue was flow and spontaneity, and, to achieve this, he would not mind if he had to look for words beyond Hindustani. But he used the humblest word, if that could convey the exact picture.

Style is the backbone of his works. Not a single page out of his tens of thousands is dull and lifeless. Always unusually vivid and of breath-taking interest, they are quick with life.

The similes and metaphors that Premchand uses are unique and original, taken from either the village or the too-familiar-to-be-overlooked life. Often he indulges in rhetoric,† sentimental comments, epigrams and puns. Aphorisms abound in his work, particularly in his dialogues and his reflections on life.

His prose is exceedingly simple—as plain, straightforward and forceful as the rustic peasant and as rhythmic as the village life. It is rapid and inexpensive, picturesque and graceful. For its lyric and poetic qualities it is unsurpassed in all Hindustani literature.

Besides characterisation, narration, dialogue and style,

† For instances see pp. 41, 42 and 45 above

a very important factor for the success of novels and short stories is plot. Here Premchand partly failed. His novels, apart from the many improbabilities, miraculous happenings and unnecessary ramblings, have very weak plots.

III THE LANDSCAPE

“The most serious and significant of all modern literary forms that the modern world has evolved,” according to a distinguished critic, “is the novel, and, brought to its highest development, the novel shares with poetry to-day the honour of being the supreme instrument of great artists’ literary skill”.

Munshi Premchand successfully attempted this type of literature. By no means perfect, he remains by far the best novelist in Hindustani literature. He constituted the advanceguard of novelists, for he was preceded by only a few lone hands.

The growth of Hindustani fiction literature is very recent. After the death of Harsha, India was faced with troublous times, till nearly a thousand years, or till the establishment of the Moghul Empire. The Delhi Court, which set standards for independent and semi-independent kingdoms, patronized Persian, the use of which was, however, limited to the upper classes. Only a few rulers recognised Hindustani or the Khari Boli—the

result of the impact of Islam on India—as the Court or the literary language. Patronage was only extended to poetry ; prose was not encouraged at all and it was not used save in letters, and that too seldom. A few writers, particularly preachers, used Hindustani for establishing contact with the masses. Aurangzeb's death in 1707 let loose forces of anarchy which hampered Hindustani literature for the next 150 years, till the Mutiny.

After the Mutiny, the West started gradually making itself felt, although the process had begun as early as the beginning of the nineteenth century. In 1818 came the 'Urdu' and 'Hindi' translations of the Holy Bible from Fort William. Unconsciously, and probably unintentionally, Fort William divided Hindustani into 'Urdu' and 'Hindi', that is Persian-ridden and Sanskrit-ridden Hindustani respectively. Thus it was that the Khari Boli was bifurcated into two branches which developed their literatures independently. The peaceful British rule was conducive to such growth ; journalism and press helped it.

Inshaullah Khan, Lalluji Lal and Sadal Misra laid the foundations of 'Hindi' which, however, struck no deep roots, till Bhartendu Harishchandra came on to the stage. 'Urdu' writers were busy with poetry and few books like *Chahar Darvish* and *Hatim Tai* were forthcoming ; the majority of works were merely repeti-

tions, enlarged or elaborated editions of the stale tales of Laila Majnun or Shirin Farhad, the theme invariably being the infidelity of women, the chivalry of men, tintured with the "appetite element" to provide sensations and entertainment.

By the end of the last century, a political consciousness was discernible among the Indian masses. Propaganda was of necessity carried on in Hindustani.

Urdu' and 'Hindi' came closer to each other. People were roused out of lethargy and looked round with amazement and a healthy curiosity. They wanted to know more about science and the West. Reynold's translations in Hindustani, in both scripts, became not only popular but the craze of the day. This encouraged composition of tales of romance and adventure. Hindustani, in its Devnagari script, saw the works of that celebrated author, Babu Devaki Nandan Khatri, such as "Chandrakanta Santati" and "Bhut Nath." *Fisana-i-Ajaib* and *Fisana-i-Azad* in the Persian script, likewise, found their way into many a home.

Thanks to the various historical factors, the Hindu masses were politically more conscious than their Muslim brethren. Precisely at this time came Sir Syed Ahmed Khan, with a band of devoted workers and from now onwards the growth of Persian-script Hindustani was phenomenal.

Rashid-ul-Khairi and Nazir Ahmed cut the painter ; they evolved a new style which was indigenous to the soil. But their approach was circumscribed. Mirza Ruswa's canvas, too, with all his brilliance of style, realistic characterisation and his mastery over plot-building, was limited. Abdul Hamid Sharar's knowledge of Islamic history was, like Alexander Dumas's, vast and intimate and, likewise, he wove his plots round Saracenic history. Though his word pictures are very realistic and he weaves complicated plots, Sharar's knowledge of his characters is skin-deep ; he does not know the mental make-ups and the psychological processes of their minds.

All these authors are, however, eclipsed by Ratan Nath Sarshar, who stands on a pinnacle of his own. In his celebrated *Fisana-i-Azad*, which is a masterpiece in its sweep, he unveiled, for the first time, the immense potentialities of Hindustani. The world of this 4,000-page book, full of vulgar and coarse humour, fused with subtleties, fun and fantasies, sugary dialogues and racy narratives, is a dreamland, entirely fantastic and unconvincing. It portrays the life of the decaying aristocracy and the "Lucknow Culture." The characterisation, nevertheless, is very vivid and penetrating. It brings us close—closer than any piece of Hindustani fiction had ever done before—to life. Sarshar's language, though very vociferous, is charming. Every sentence is a world by itself. *Fisana-i-Azad*, along with *Fisana-i-Ajaib*, had a great

influence on Premchand's young mind and his style. It was to be his starting point. His achievement lay in doing away with the colour-stuff in the then existing fiction and in replacing it with emotions and feelings, aspirations and frustrations, sorrows and happiness of the masses. He introduced realism, a breadth of vision, a local colouring, a body and a soul. He brought it in gear with contemporary life.

But this process was long, demanding his unswerving devotion for thirty-five years, during which he manured and watered the plant of Hindustani literature, till now in the nursery stage, to grow into a mighty tree.

Premchand wrote over a dozen volumes of fiction, which appeared in both the Devnagari and the Persian scripts. To study these in a systematic manner, it is essential to classify them according to some plan. To the casual reader, nothing would seem easier than a presentation of his works in a chronological order. This path, however, is beset with difficulties. Some of Premchand's works were written at the beginning of the present century, but remained unpublished for a number of years, when they were amplified, refurbished and published in different guises. This, therefore, necessitates a classification on different lines.

For treatment in this book, we shall divide his novels according to their themes and general tendencies. On

the basis of this plan, his works may be divided into four distinct phases : the Formative Phase, 1901-12 ; the Phase of Maturiy, 1912-22 ; the Gandhi Phase, 1921-32 ; and, finally, the Premchand Phase, 1932-36.

The first book in the Formative Phase was *Pratap Chandra* (1901). It was not published till much later in an enlarged form as "Vardan" or *Jalwa-i-Isar*. In 1904 appeared "Prema", which was later enlarged into "Pratigya," in the Persian script, it appeared as *Ham Khurma-o-Ham Sawab* and still later as *Bewah*. Really speaking, both these novels are merely long short stories, like *Kishna* which appeared about the same time but was, a quarter of a century later, enlarged, with slight contemporary colouring, into that stout volume of fiction, "*Ghaban*." There is yet another novel, "*Nirmala*", which too falls in this phase.

All these books betray Premchand's keen sense of social consciousness. The subject matter of these novels is domestic and social problems and the stage is the middle class, particularly the one in the towns. In these novels could be discerned the conflict between the Old and the New. Premchand often divagates and makes unnecessary observations on contemporary social problems. At times, he sermonises, but, thanks to his inimitable flow and spontaniety, he is never dull.

Save "*Nirmala*" and "*Ghaban*," which appeared in

the twenties, none of these works betrays any loftiness of thought, or intensity of feeling. The characters are all Hindus. The language is either Persian or Sanskrit-ridden, very stiff for the common Hindustani-knowing reader.

Nevertheless, these attempts were a preparation for a maturer novel, *Bazar-i-Husn* or "Sevasadan," the only novel which falls in the second phase. Almost all the tendencies of the second phase can be traced to these attempts of the first phase. Throughout he had some unpleasant things to say about the miserable lot of Indian woman, particularly the Hindu widow. He criticised misfit matrimonial unions, extravagance on marriage and Indian woman's love for ornaments.

At a time when Reynold's translations found favour with the Indian reading public, even "Prema" was a bold departure; it condemned the contemporary flight from realities. Prema and Dinanath live, like hundreds and thousands of their sisters and brothers.

"Prema" is a crusade for re-marriage of Hindu widows. On Basant Kumar's death, Purna is left a widow; shrewd Kamla Prasad wants to take undue advantage of her pitiable plight; Purna has to flee to a house of ill-fame, from where she is taken to a rescue home.

Premchand exhorts widowers to marry, if marry they

must, only widows. For those widows who get no opportunity to marry again, he proposes the usually suggested solution—an ashram where they can devote themselves either to religious, social or political work. Success can be achieved only by determined and purposeful idealists, like Amrit Rai, who are prepared to sacrifice their very lives for a cause.

In “Vardan,” the widow mother wishes her only son to be a great leader who could deliver the motherland from the yoke of the foreigner. The son, however, falls in love with Virjan, but, ultimately, turns a sadhu to serve the country’s cause whole-heartedly.

“*Nirmala*” stands apart from Premchand’s works of all phases, owing to its unity of structure and plot. It is the biography of a girl, Nirmala, who is given (or sold?) away, thanks to the dowry system, to an old wealthy man, aged enough to be her father. This unhappy union results in the ruination of the aged man’s family; of his three sons, one dies an early death, another commits suicide and the third leaves the home. All this happens through no fault of Nirmala’s, who is doubted, on the one hand, by a husband who demands forced love, and, on the other, hated by the step-sons. This novel is a stern warning to those aged men who marry for the sake of lust, as also to men who barter away the future of their young daughters. Nirmala’s

life is a tragedy—a tragedy without relief. Hers is the lot of countless Indian women. Like them, she is the victim of a vicious system.

Another instance of such an unhappy couple is that of Ratan, a jewel of a woman, who is married to an issueless and aged pleader, in "*Ghaban*." By his early death, he ruins her life; the realisation of his mistake and his remorse on the death-bed cannot help Ratan.

Ratan's theme, however, is not the most important theme of "*Ghaban*," a novel wherein the problem dealt with arises out of woman's love for ornaments. The novel deals with the life of one individual couple and not society.

Ratan Nath is an educated young man of new lights. He is an ill-paid clerk in the terminal-tax department. After he is married, he tries to show off riches, which he has'nt, to his wife, whom he sincerely loves. He indulges in tall talk and moves with upper class people. To maintain a false standard, he accepts illegal gratification, and buys a costly necklace on credit for his wife. He tells lies after lies; to uphold one, he has to tell several others. Things come to a delicate pass; he can't pay off the necklace money. Therefore, he is hard-passed to embezzle money, and to leave his home in shame. He goes to Calcutta and there lives with a low-caste Khatik, who indulges in drinks

and narcotics but is, nevertheless, hospitable in the right traditional manner.

Truth now dawns on Jalpa, Rama Nath's wife. She is typical of Premchand's ideal woman. She holds herself the cause of all of Rama Nath's troubles. Overnight, she is transformed. She gives up her ease-loving life and sets out in search of her husband. Before she succeeds, Rama Nath has turned an approver in a case of political dacoity, of which he has no knowledge whatsoever. For this, Jalpa hates him and goes so far as to voluntarily serve as an unpaid maid in the family of one of Rama Nath's victims.

Rama Nath's failings are the failings of the middle class, which constitutes the intelligentsia and gets all the benefits of a liberal education.

This class actually grew out of the impact of the West on India. It contributes by far the largest number of clerks and leads an entirely artificial life. With little earnings, its members maintain costly establishments; and to keep up this high standard they augment their incomes in illegal ways. So much so that it has become almost impossible for an honest man to exist. Rama Nath's father, Dina Nath, is honest, and for this he is hated by his wife and his son.

“Sevasadan” or *Bazar-i-Husn* again brings to to the forefront the evil consequences of a system that breeds a middle class which makes a show of a standard which it cannot maintain without accepting illegal gratification.

The range of the author, as revealed by this book, has considerably widened. Its sweep is greater; the theme loftier and bolder; the presentation maturer; Muslim characters make their debut; idealism takes deeper and stronger roots. The main problem analysed is the age-old problem of prostitution. There are, however, significant observations on many a problem; such as the Hindu-Muslim problem, the question of *lingua franca* and the educational system.

Considered by some as Premchand's best work, this book is a maturer piece of fiction, unsurpassed by his later works in its lyrical qualities. There is a touch of poetry about it. In this book Premchand was not conscious of his individuality as a writer.

It is not surprising, in view of its literary worth, that the book took the country by storm. It was not long before its translations into other Indian languages were forthcoming.

In “Sevasadan,” Darogha Kishen Chand, faced with the needs of a dowry for Summan, his daughter, is forced to put his idealism and honesty in cold

storage and accept bribes. He is brought before the court, charged with corruption and sentenced to imprisonment.

During his absence in jail, Summan is married to Gajadhar, an ill-paid clerk, getting only fifteen rupees a month. A vivacious creature, full of ambitions, used to a luxurious life, Summan wants her husband, too, to accept bribes, because she feels that honesty has no place in this world.

Gradually her personality asserts; she is even attracted and thinks that the lot of her neighbour, Bholi, a prostitute, is much better than hers; for Bholi dresses well, eats well and is honoured by the big guns of society.

Summan's husband, too, instinctively feels her mental conflict. He comes to doubt Summan's movements into the neighbour pleader's house.

And doubts in a married life are fatal. Summan is turned out of the house, to take refuge with Bholi and to adorn the red light street.

When Kishen Chand completes his sentence, his family has gone to the dogs; his wife is dead and Summan, one of his two daughters, has adopted the ignoble profession of prostitution. His fall is too great even for him, and he commits suicide by drowning himself into the Ganges.

From a distance Summan had felt tempted, but closer association with the red light disillusions her; she realises her mistake and, like a traditional woman of Premchand's conception, decides to remain only a dancing girl; she cooks her own food and does not sell away her body!

Premchand's was a chaste soul; he laid great stress on purity. He takes us through the prostitutes' quarters, but our thoughts remain uncontaminated—nay, they are elevated. Instead of looking down on Summan and Bholi with contempt, we take pity on their lot and sympathise with them, just as we sympathise with the thief in Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*. Like him, too, these prostitutes have adopted a profession against their own will. They are the victims of a vicious system.

Summan is the pivotal point of the novel; we never lose sight of her. Through her and the people with whom she comes into contact, we see the entire middle class—a sort of cross-section through society.

Throughout the book, there are very close and intimate psychological character studies. The divergent views of different people on any, and every, problem are expressed through the city fathers. There are vociferous people like Padam Singh, who is a radical thinker, but reels back at the thought of

putting ideas into action. In practice he is very conservative. Later in the book, we find him ashamed of himself for his weakness. He cannot face Summan's gaze, and, therefore, dares not go near her.

Then there is Madan Singh, who insists on having a *nautch* party on the occasion of Sadan Singh's marriage, for he believes that marriage is incomplete without it and that on it depends his *izzat*. He opposes Sadan's marriage to Shanta, Summan's sister, simply because Shanta is the sister of one who has joined a profession considered ignoble. It is not without considerable difficulty that Summan overcomes these difficulties and obstacles. Thanks to the help of reformers like Vithal Das, she ultimately succeeds in setting up an asylum.

Premchand's next novel was *Gosha-i-Afiat* or "Premashram." With its appearance begins the Gandhi Phase of Premchand's literary activity. The novels of this third phase—"Premashram" or *Gosha-i-Afiat* (1922); *Chaugan-i-Hasti* or "Rangabhumi" (1926) *Parda-i-Majaz* or "Kayakalp" (1928); partly "*Ghaban*" (1930) and *Maidan-i-Amal* or "Karmabhumi" (1932)—are the product of the impact on Premchand's politically conscious and receptive mind of the events that fall between 1921 and 1932 and which affected Indian life in its various phases. In the movements that fall during

these years, the social, economic and political issues were inexorably mixed up. Premchand is engrossed in these issues; he is concerned with the present and does not worry about the future.

“Sevasadan” was staged in the vitiated and stuffy atmosphere of Benares, particularly its hot spots. Towards its end, however, we found ourselves in a Magdalene Asylum, Sevasadan, situated in the village fields across the Ganges. The real India, we know, lives in villages.

Never again was Premchand to go back to the town. When, and if at all, he visited the town, the visit was temporary, and it had some bearing on the life in the village. One might, not inaptly, say that the novels of the third phase, as also the next, constitute the history of the modern Indian village. All of them are permeated with a profound sympathy for the peasant who, thanks to recent political movements, has become politically conscious, as he never did before.

Generally, these novels are staged in the United Provinces villages. The Indian peasant, however, is the same everywhere; every village has its Balraj, Hori, Dhaniya, Kadir Mian and Sukkhu Choudhary.

The attempt to portray a major transformation, to translate it on paper, as also to set the scale of values

of the Indian peasant in fiction, was, to say the least, unprecedented, for it had not been done before.

A marked characteristic of Premchand's works in this phase is a deepening quest for spiritual and moral values, the propagation of which is affected directly by satirising certain actions and conventions and by eulogising others. There are heroes and leaders who lead the masses from strength to strength.

Really speaking, all of them are contemporary men of action in political, social or religious fields. They are inspired by the noble ideals of selfless service, love, patriotism and truth, which entail suffering. Be it Premshankar or Sur Das, Chakradhar or Amarkant, all of them are idealists, so much so that at times they verge on the improbable. Premshankar, in "Premashram", seems to be imitating Tolstoy in his actions and precepts. In "Rangabhumi", the blind beggar, Sur Das, cultivates, like Gandhiji, a great soul force through suffering; he successfully leads a mass struggle. Miss Sophia's character, again, is inspired by the personality of Mrs. Annie Besant, and Amarkant, in "Karmabhumi", is the prototype of Jawaharlal Nehru.

Like Gandhiji, Premchand believed in the value of suffering. Those who suffer and die for the oppressed constitute, in his opinion, the higher race; others are either victims, or brutes.

compare them to Summan, who could have achieved nothing without the help of Vithal Das and others.

In "Premashram," we see Shraddha, the conservative wife of Premshankar who has returned from America to be outcast because he has refused to perform *prayaschita*. In Shraddha's heart, there is a great conflict between love and religion, between truth and falsehood, as represented by Premshankar and the hypocritical people wedded to out-of-date conventions. She recognises the greatness of Premshankar, and the hollowness of society, but she lacks courage to flout it; she has no individual will.

Compare her to Sukhda in "Karmabhmi," who has a strong personality. Sukhda's union with Amarkant is not at all happy; you can break her but not bend her. When Sukhda is too hard on poor Amarkant, he leaves home to become a leader who serves the cause of peasants and Harijans.

Amarkant's is no weak character; he is determined on action and brooks with no obstacles; action and conscience are the only two laws which he obeys. He alienates his wife, his sister and his father.

By and by the theme of the novels in this phase becomes loftier and loftier, the application to life wider and wider. In "Premashram," Hindu and Muslim characters moved hand in hand. In "Rangabhumi,"

Christian characters also make their debut. "Kayakalp" holds up to us the great friendship between Khwaja Mahmud and Yashodanandan, although later it turns into bitter enmity, and what one would not give for a friendship like Amar's and Salim's? In "Rangabhumi," reformers leave British India and make inroads on Indian States. In "Karmabhumi," not only the entire middle and upper classes wage the struggle, but also Harijans.

Sex is fundamental; it is the pivotal point of a domestic life. Summan's suppressed desires attract her to the oldest profession in the world. In "Premashram," these desires reappear in Gayatri, who, conscious of her ignoble acts and her degradation, is remorseful; her fall has been too great, unworthy of an ideal character of Premchand's conception; she has to commit suicide. Her prototype in "Kayakalp" is Devapriya, who parades her carnality.

On the metaphysical problem of whether or not the unsatisfied and suppressed desires are the cause of rebirth, Premchand deeply reflected, and it seems that he reached the conclusion that they are. In support of his thesis, he gives the Vedantic and the Puranic arguments that he had digested in his teens. In "Kayakalp," one feels the same atmosphere as one does in Conan Doyle's or Rider Haggard's works.

Premchand, at times, believed in the miraculous and the supernatural. Sukkhu Choudhary puts Kartar to test, and the latter, by his mere touch, turns dust into gold ! Rai Kamlanand practises yoga and gets rid of the bodily poisons by these practices. In "Kayakalp" Raja of Jagdishpur knows all about his previous three births. It sounds queer, but there you have it.

This treatise, "Kayakalp," on one of the subtlest philosophical problems has another important aspect, too. It is the result of Premchand's reflections at a time of political lull. Hindu-Muslim riots broke out; the leaders were helpless and the question of Indian independence receded into the background. In "Kayakalp," we hear the echo of these riots. Premchand traced the causes of the trouble to whims and misguided emotion of both parties and an unnecessary insistence on rights which have no significance. His solution was that young men, like Chakradhar, should risk their lives for the cause.

It should be clear to the reader by now that Premchand took the theme of his novels from contemporary life. These themes he carefully blended with his own idealism, his ideas on love and service, and his outlook on life.

Gosha-i-Afiat or "Premashram" is the story of the struggle waged by the starving peasants against the

iniquitous zamindari system. It is the representation of the zamindar's unbridled ambition, to take away the rights of the peasants and to retain his own privileges. The realist Gyanshankar, perhaps the meanest man in Premchand's works, is a thoroughly selfish person. He has been fed on a materialistic and "commercialised" education of the Western type.

The old zamindari system, in Premchand's opinion, was better in many ways, for the exploitation in old ways was not completely thorough. Besides, there existed a personal bond between the zamindar and the tenants.

Premchand exposes the undesirability of the present system. Every event in "Premashram" deepens its hideousness. Few people, including the zamindars, believe in the justice of the system. Always it is their selfishness which makes them keep their mouths shut. Dr. Chopra, Jwala Singh and Erfan Ali sympathise with the peasant, but the sugar-plums offered by the zamindar are too effective. Even Rai Sahib Kamlanand, a zamindar himself, believes that the system is out-of-date. None, save Premshankar, however, is prepared to take the lead. What his sacrifice has achieved, we see on the last page of "Premashram", where Kadir Mian portrays the happy state of affairs in Lakhanpur.

The Tolstoyan abnegation of Premshankar is the most

striking thing. He is honest, determined and never loses sight of duty.

Premchand had implicit faith in the inherent magnanimity and trusteeship of the zamindar, whose heart, he held, could be melted by sacrifice and organised passive resistance on a mass scale by peasants.

Nevertheless, Premchand held out a warning to those who refuse to face the logic of changed circumstances. Balraj is a pointer to the shape of things to come; he represents the spirit of revolt; the future rests with him. He believes in the Socialistic theory of State and reads in books and a newspaper that he regularly gets of the magnificent achievements of peasants in Russia. Obviously, it is Balraj, and not the zamindar, who shall triumph over the other and rise above his hostile surroundings.

Nineteen twenty-six found the world enveloped in industrial strikes. The Indian labourer had his part to play. Premchand—ever a disciple of Tolstoy's theories—opposed the large-scale industrialisation of a predominantly agricultural country like India, with her huge surplus labour. Through Sur Das, the blind beggar, his mouthpiece and hero, he wages a war against industrialisation in his 1,000-page book "Rangabhumi," which is considered by many to be his best work.

Sur Das is inspired by the highest human ideals; he has

weaknesses, too, for he belongs to the tribe of Man. Once, we find him harbouring thoughts to sell away the piece of pasturage to the pseudo-patriotic John Sewak and Kunwar Bharat Singh, who want to buy a piece of land for a tobacco factory in the name of the country's advancement and exploit the village labour. But Sur Das is inherently great, and rises to princely heights. Through his determination and sympathy, he triumphs. And he is so poor that our sympathies go out to him : when he cooks his own food, tears flow down his cheeks from his blind eyes.

The footprints of Time are also audible in "*Ghaban*," in which the police "manufacture" approvers in cases of political dacoities.

In 1930 clouds again rose and darkened the Indian political skies. Premchand now wrote his "*Karmabhumi*" (1932), wherein we see crusades on behalf of Harijans, peasants and the poorer classes. In the book we see graphic pictures of the satyagraha movement, jails and repression.

Munshi Premchand shows how the herd instinct operates in the masses. This herd unity is the cause of the success of popular movements. In political meetings, passions are high and people move in a crowd in no direction without direction.

An important psychological character study is that of

Munni, who is raped by tommies. She thinks herself polluted and would not pollute her husband and her son, although they die in search of her, by her very sight. She asks her husband to re-marry and not to come near her.

The ancillary theme of Munni is very important ; she becomes the symbol of “ national honour ” ; meetings are held to support her cause.

An important characteristic of this book is the part taken in popular movements by Indian women, till now living a secluded life. Although the spadework has been done by professor Shantikumar, it is Nina and Sukhda who lead the campaign.

The book brings to light the bane of leadership, which ate into the very vitals of satyagraha movements. Shantikumar is jealous of Sukhda, for she has got all praise and name, while he stood the *lathi* charge and was confined, as a result thereof, to hospital for months. When Sukhda herself mentions this fact, Shantikumar's vanity is satisfied ; he feels flattered. In a discussion between his colleague and Salim, the latter says that the greatest weakness of, and the really big bait to, a political leader is an invitation to preside over a meeting and to be presented with a purse.

Often such movements succeed in wringing out a few concessions. Thus in Premchand's novels, the masses

usually triumph. "Premashram," "Rangabhumi," "Kayakalp" and "Karmabhumi" all end ideally.

This, however, is not the case with "*Godan*," the last complete novel by Premchand and the only one in the last phase; it differs from his other works in several ways; here sheer realism eclipses idealism. Indeed, of the latter there is almost none. It is a powerful criticism of life. Unlike in "Rangabhumi", here there is no philosophy; there is no strategy for either a social revolution as in "Sevasadan," or political as in novels of the third phase, such as "Premashram," "Kayakalp" and "Karmabhumi."

For ruthless observation of Indian peasant's life, his undergoing ceaseless agony, there is no better instance or a grimmer picture than "*Godan*." It is quick with the rhythm of life. The nearest parallel is perhaps the Nobel Prize-winning book, "Good Earth", by Pearl Buck. In "*Godan*", Premchand's art is at the highest.

The theme of "*Godan*" is Premchand's favourite theme—the Indian peasant. Herein the struggle is between the peasant and the moneylender backed by various forces depending for their sustenance on the peasant. It is a biography of Hori, Pearl Buck's Wang Lung. The tragedy of his life deepens at every successive stage; he faces crisis after crisis till.....till he dies of exhaustion; with his death ends his battle of life. The

novel, too, ends abruptly. Hori is symbolic of Premchand's own life. Strangely enough, whereas "*Godan*" turned out to be his last novel, "*Kafan*" was the last collection of his short stories, published during his lifetime.

Hori and his wife, Dhaniya, represent an entire class, whose weaknesses and virtues they share. Hori is a practical realist and knows intimately and instinctively the human psychology; he needs no Dale Carnegie to guide him; he expresses great sympathy with Bhola for his difficulty in getting himself married again and promises his help, for at the back of his mind is the idea that he would be able to cheat Bhola of a cow, the possession of which is the ambition of every Indian peasant, and the root of all trouble in "*Godan*." He flatters Dhaniya, so that she may give hay to Bhola without much fuss.

He has weaknesses. He flirts with Dulari, the widow moneylender, and, off and on, cuts an indecent joke. But he is faithful to his wife, Dhaniya, the vociferous and incorrigible chatterer, who loves him with all her soul. In the very first chapter, we find her fixing her gaze after Hori, till he is beyond her sight. It is not unusual to find Hori beating her when he is annoyed. And still he loves her dearly, passionately.

Hori is not scrupulously honest; in extreme difficulty, he accepts Rs. 200 for his daughter's marriage; on

another occasion, he is prepared to help a third party, provided he is able to cheat his brother, Hira, whom he brought up as his own son before the break-up of the family, of a few annas.

Nevertheless, his blood boils when Hira's wife's honour is at stake; it is as much Hira's as his own. He has a first-rate row with the Choudhary who has come to buy bamboos. This brother, Hira, out of jealousy, poisons the cow that Hori has brought.

Ashamed of his own action, he leaves his home. The police come to investigate. Hori feels that Hira's *izzat* is his own; he has seen Hira standing by the cow in the dark, but now he swears by his son that he has not seen Hira there. Nay, he borrows money to bribe the police to hush up matters.

Hori is on death-bed when Hira returns, and still he loves him as dearly as he did before. During Hira's absence, Hori helps Puniya, Hira's wife, in her work, in preference over his own work, for he feels that he is in duty bound because her husband is away, and she is a member of the family, in spite of the division.

To refer to another aspect of his life, he is as afraid of the policeman as of death. But when he sees his landlord's life in jeopardy, he is bold like a lion and jumps on the "Pathan."

Gobar, Hori's son, has an affair with Jhuniya, Bhola's widow daughter; when he finds that she is carrying a child by him, he is afraid of the consequences and leaves her in the lurch. What is she to do? Her father would kill her if he came to know of this. She, therefore, goes to Hori's. Dhaniya takes a very stern attitude; she goes to acquaint Hori of the situation and persuades him not to give shelter to Jhuniya. Both husband and wife are determined not to give her refuge. Gradually, however, as they approach Jhuniya, their determination oozes out, and Hori can only say: "Fear nothing, dear daughter. This is your own home. We are your own. Feel yourself perfectly at ease."

And Hori gives refuge to Jhuniya at the cost of alienating the entire village, for, as a result, the village council imposes a heavy fine on Hori, who is already over head and ears in debt; they cannot stand this fornication in the village. Really speaking, they have their own pockets to fill.

Hori's blasphemy consists in his poverty. Pandit Matadin has a keep, Siliya, a Chamarin by caste; Pateshwari Shah carries on with the water-carrier woman; Jhinguri Shah has a Brahmin mistress; Nokhe Ram has employed Bhola only to have his young wife. All these open adulteries do not matter. Matadin does not eat food touched by Siliya: "Dharma lies only in food." And

Matadin and his moneylender friends constitute the village council; they are the "pillars of society."

Hori is poor, not because he is lazy but almost because he works too hard. Even in the scorching heat of June, we find his tender-aged children helping him. He is poor, again, because his blood is being sucked by half a dozen leeches. He owes money to almost every petty moneylender, Bisheshar Shah, Jhinguri Shah and Nokhe Ram. He borrows Rs. 30 from Dulari; in three years it becomes a hundred rupees, when a promissory note is written; after another two years, she demands Rs. 150. Mangru Shah has lent him Rs. 60, to go in for a pair of oxen. These sixty rupees he has paid several times over; but the loan stands where it did in the beginning.

At harvest time, Hori is left with nothing; his produce is taken away straight from the fields. He has to borrow more to eat. And thus loans pile up. The moneylender lends him money to keep him alive, because with his death the moneylender loses a rich source of income; it is the hen that lays the golden egg. The loan once taken can never be paid back; it increases in a geometrical progression. In his vain attempt to pay off these debts, Hori's end comes abruptly,

His life has been a burden—an unwelcome burden. He has only one tattered *mirzai* made by Dhaniya five years ago. He cannot get another and has, therefore,

to remain contented. When he was born, he shared a blanket with his father; now he shares it with his son, and, on his death, will leave it to him and his son.

What then is the way out of this poverty? Unlike his other novels, herein Premchand suggests no solution. His pessimism has deepened. He had started off, at the beginning of the century, as an idealist and ends up as an incurable pessimist.

In "Premashram," we see Balraj revolting against this cruel "system" based on exploitation. In "Godan," Gobar represents the spirit of revolt. In the beginning of the novel, one feels that Gobar will perhaps become a great leader and lead a revolt or satyagraha. These hopes are, however, belied. Under the present system one becomes either an exploiter or an exploited. Gobar goes to Lucknow to earn a fortune. He becomes a labourer and saves some money which he lends at a much higher rate of interest, thus becoming a part of the system that grinds his father down, and against which he was to rise in revolt.

Before "Godan" was written, Premchand read extensively on the magnificent experiment in Russia, and, it seems, he became enamoured of the system of collective farming. He lost all faith in democracy, councils, elections, rural reconstruction and other empty phrases signifying nothing.

He realised that in the pseudo-nationalists the peasant had a really formidable foe. Rai Sahib of "*Godan*" is typical of the crop of nationalist-capitalists and John Sewak of the nationlist-industrialist, which grew up after the satyagraha movements. Rai Sahib is a patriot; or at least he passes off for one; in the satyagraha movement, he courts imprisonment; he puts on khaddar, is a litterateur and writes skits; he is a philanthropist and gives large sums of money for public works; he is a radical thinker and believes in Socialism and shows genuine sympathy for the peasant. And yet he is a magnificent cheat. He keeps his legs in both the camps. He bribes the editor of *Bijli* to keep the editor's mouth shut against his own tyrannies; he exacts forced labour.

He recognises that injustice has been done to Hori by the village council, who have fined him, and asks the councillors to disgorge the fine realised from Hori. Instead of going back to poor Hori, the fine goes to enrich the coffers of Rai Sahib.

Hori's struggle, Premchand believes, is against this system, represented by the moneylender who is supported in his sinister designs by the bureaucracy, the aristocracy and the priestly classes, all exploiting the poor peasant.

The poverty of the peasant is presented in stark

nakedness, with the background of the luxurious life of Rai Sahib and the plutocracy. Very sympathetically, Premchand has portrayed the contrast of Hori and Rai Sahib.

To successfully portray the struggle between two stratas of the social order, Premchand always uses the nineteenth century method of novel technique, namely to heighten the effect by introducing two or more incoherent, or independent, themes running parallel to each other, touching only at the surface, and that too at only a few points. In "Premashram" the theme of the zamindar is quite apart from the theme of the peasant. In "Rangabhumi," there are three independent themes, Vinaya's, Sur Das's and John Sewak's. In "Karmabhumi," the three themes of the triangular struggle are represented by Harijans, peasants and the poor people living in miserable dwellings in the town.

Premchand was no expert in weaving systematic and complicated plots. Usually, he started off at a tangent, and left the plot develop itself. His stories and novels begin right from the childhood of the chief characters of the novel. In a letter which he wrote to Shri Jaiendra Kumarji he admits the difficulty of starting a novel in the middle of the hero's life.

Again, Premchand exercised a great economy of invention. In most of his novels one feels that he merely

wove a few events, chiselled a few characters and simply blended them together.

The chapters are loosely "pieced" together—so loosely sometimes that a chapter could be taken out without disturbing the arrangement of the book.

There is, usually, little of suspense in his novels. The *denouement* is always betrayed, through suggestion, gossip, dream or reverie, very early in the novel. On page six of "*Nirmala*", through Nirmala's brown study, we already know the end of the novel. Vishal Singh's talk betrays to us the end of "*Kayakalp*." Hardly have we gone far into "*Godan*", when we sense some danger to the life of the cow, and, subsequently, to the family: "the coming of the cow is a bad omen", we are told. Hori's neighbours are jealous of him and Datadin issues a warning that the cow must not be left in the street. Dhaniya, too, insists that it must be kept inside the house. And it is not long before the cow is poisoned; indeed, its end comes too soon.

Coincidences, improbable happenings and the supernatural element predominate in Premchand's works. In "*Sevasadan*", Swami Gajanand, repentant husband of Summan, always appears at the psychological moment. We are left to guess who directed Summan to Gajanand's hut. Summan trying to be funny while leaving the red light street, borders on the ridiculous. In "*Premashram*",

Manohar commits suicide while he is still in the custody of the police; brother beheads brother to appease Bhaironji.

All these can either mean that Premchand believed in the supernatural, or that he only introduced them to portray the truest picture of peasants and the middle class, as they really are.

Moreover, 'too many of Premchand's characters die unnatural deaths, either by drowning, by accident, or by epidemic. His exposition of characters is very good, but, invariably, he lands them in delicate and hopeless situations, whence there is no way out, save by violent or unnatural death. One might well say that, like the spider, he wove a fine web, but could not extricate himself, except by damaging the delicate and fine meshes of the web. The result is jarring.

"*Godan*" in this respect is slightly on a higher note. There are only a few coincidences, and no character is summarily disposed of. From the point of view of plot and design, too, it is a maturer attempt. Premchand's descriptive powers are at their highest; the lyrical element of his genius, too, is at its full expression. This novel alone gives Munshi Premchand a niche in the temple of fame.

Romain Rolland considers that true literature must rise above national frontiers. Peasants and labourers

of subject India dominate a major portion of Premchand's writings; they talk the country dialect, observe the customs of the countryside, subscribe at times to superstitions and taboos and are hospitably hospitable—virtues shared by peasants all over the world. These men and women live on terms of perfect equality and brotherhood; bear no ill will to anyone, and would gladly share their hard-earned bread with all without distinction of colour or creed. They don't trouble themselves about the philosophy of living; they don't reason out things; they love mankind; they act; and they live because they are born to live.

In his technique, the nearest parallel to Premchand is Tolstoy, closely followed by Charles Dickens.

Both Tolstoy and Premchand were inspired by the same ideals. Intellectually, Premchand was a faithful disciple of the great Russian savant, whose influence on Premchand is very marked. Both were akin to the soil and wrote for the masses. Both successfully tried the short story and had a wonderful grasp over the psychology of children. Both were reformers and historians. Compare, for instance, the works of Premchand, particularly those falling in the Gandhi Phase, to Tolstoy's *War and Peace*.

Another such Russian writer is Maxim Gorki, whose passion for independence and revolution was on par

with that of Premchand. Both were the voice of the oppressed and advocated a vital shake-up. Both had a bold vision. But, whereas Gorki emphasised the strategy of revolution, Premchand preferred evolution—a peaceful evolution.

Gorki's stage was the market-place and the factory; Premchand's was the village. Both were chroniclers of their times. The one was the disciple-lieutenant of a violent revolutionary and the other of a confirmed pacifist. The theme of Gorki's "Mother" is somewhat parallel to Premchand's "*Karmabhumi*."

Both Gorki and Tolstoy are too serious. Premchand's works are permeated with humour and satire. A very close parallel is Charles Dickens. Both are possessed of great descriptive powers and subtle satire. But Premchand's humour is much weaker.

Both Premchand and Dickens are no good in plot-building. Their works are episodical and lack coherence; in either there is an exuberance of characters. Both attempted and failed in portraying the life of the upper classes. They are essentially men of the masses, humanitarians and chroniclers of the times in which they lived. Whereas Premchand revolts against callousness, misery and pain, Dickens draws out humour and is an optimist. Dickens's field is, however, limited to the stuffy atmosphere of London; and Premchand lives in

the free breezes of the Indian village. Lakhanpur and Pandepur.

In the portrayal of village life, Thomas Hardy comes very near to Premchand. Their pity for the oppressed made them both deny the existence of God—a kind, fatherly and personal God. Both are masters of the rural dialect and successfully portray the life of the masses, even their superstitions. Nature plays a very important part in their novels—however, with one essential difference. In Hardy's novels, Nature is hostile to the human characters and is a monstrous sinister personality. In Premchand's works, it is a sympathetic observer, a dainty thing, and changes according to the moods of the characters ; it merely puts the characters against a bold relief. Hardy was out and out a fatalist and a confirmed pessimist. Premchand shared these characteristics, but he took joy in suffering, for he believed that real suffering led to happiness.

For Premchand's joy in suffering, insistence on truth, ceaseless work, idealism and pacifistic outlook on life, we might well compare him with Romain Rolland, the celebrated French writer and humanitarian. The latter, however, lacks the humour which permeates Premchand's works. Both have a simple, homely style and, usually, intersperse their works with

their own aphorisms and brief observations on life. Whereas Romain Rolland has a high-strung sensitive temperament at all times, Premchand rises to heights of righteous indignation only at intervals. Both are great universalists and desire freedom for all, but here Romain Rolland leaves the other far behind, for Premchand was comparatively an irredentist and limited his field to the Indian peasant.

After the model of Tagore, the idealist, Premchand very successfully wrote a number of short stories. Like him he preached the true, the good and the beautiful in life. Both believed in the utilitarian view of art. They successfully brought out the motivities and the thought-processes of their characters and analysed situations very well. But whereas Premchand always bungled in sloving a problem or suggesting a solution, Tagore almost always suggested a profound solution. Premchand's solution is invariably Gandhian. He always, as shown above, lands his characters in hopeless situations and brings them to a violent end. Tagore, however, unlike Premchand, wrote only a few novels; he represented the spirit of Bengal; he did not deal with life in its entirety. Unlike Premchand, but like Saratchandra Chatterji, he is often subjective, sentimental and romantic.

Chatterji was, primarily, a novelist and Premchand a

short story writer. In his works, Saratchandra used comparatively far more suggestion and left the reader to understand many things by implication.

Unlike Premchand's works, Saratchandra's have very complicated plots. The *denouement* is not betrayed in the beginning of the story and suspense is of a very high order. Both succeeded in characterisation, in exposing the hidden motives and heart-processes, although in this exposition Saratchandra surpassed his rival and contemporary. In Saratchandra there is a delicacy, a femininity; in Premchand there is force and masculinity. The one is engrossed in the struggle of the heart, the other in the struggle of life. Saratchandra is superior in so far as the portrayal of the household life in all its detail is concerned. But his field is limited to the house. Premchand goes out to the masses; he is the representative of the tongue-tied and suffering humanity. And Premchand's portrayal of the peasants' feelings, emotions and environments cannot be surpassed.

Aldous Huxley is another literary and intellectual giant of to-day, with whom we might well compare Premchand. Both are in a way original thinkers, although Premchand lacks Huxley's comprehensive cosmopolitan outlook. Both of them suffer from a

great defect—badly chiselled plots. The chapters in their books are independent wholes, “pieced ” together in a book. Both Huxley and Premchand are writers with a purpose and reflect deeply on the conflict and indecision of our times. One wonders if that accounts for the lack of coherence in their works and their zeal for propaganda for a certain set of ideals.

Fortunately, this defect of looseness of plot is absent from Premchand’s short stories, which are, indeed, very compact.

IV LIFE IN LITTLE

Premchand's novels, excellent though they are, scarcely present him as well as do his short stories. In spite of the fact that in his later days the novelist in him asserted itself more and more, he remained primarily a short story writer ; and it is in this field that his success and popularity remain unsurpassed. A pioneer in modern stories in Hindustani, he has written several, out of his over 220, short stories which are literary masterpieces.

Although the basic principles of novel and short story are the same, the short story suffers from one great limitation, namely of space. In the novel, the analysis of a character is not only permissible but also welcome ; in the short story only the landmarks have to be picked out. Again, whereas a novel encompasses life, a short story deals with only one aspect of it. The novel is panoramic : the short story pictorial.

Like the " movies " in urban life, the short story

occupies to-day an enviable place in modern literature the world over, the craft being, literally, as old as the hills. Past is the day when literature was written for the selected few who had time and money to lose themselves in the never-ending Arabian Nights. To-day it also caters to the needs of the man-in-the-street, who, in this age when speed is a mania, cannot afford more than half an hour a day for reading. And, to quote H G. Wells, any piece of composition which can be read in fifteen minutes is a short story.

The short story is a very handy art for the writer in India, because the problems arising out of our usually orthodox views on life and the restrictions on social intercourse can be suitably represented on the "shortened canvas"; and for the careful and calculating observer the horizon of themes is illimitable.

The growth of short story literature in India has been very chequered. Although the short story originated in the Orient, it had to go round the world before it was used here in its modern form as a literary vehicle. In ancient India, it was used in the form of parables for spiritual enlightenment. The "Hitopdesha" and "Panchtantra" are admirable instances.

In the not too distant past, collections of short stories such as *Bostan Khayyal*, *Alif Laila*, "*Singhasan Batisi*," "*Baital Pachisi*" and "*Kathasarit Sagar*" appeared.

The beginnings of the modern short story in India, like the renaissance in all Indian arts and letters, were made in Bengal at the end of the last century; and it was Tagore's stories which inspired Premchand later, and guided him to avenues till now unexplored.

Several hands had attempted short stories in Hindustani. But whereas in the Persian script Rashi-ul-Khairi and Sultan Haidar Josh were carried away by their sermonising zeal and Sajjad Haidar was more of a romanticist, the stories in the Devnagari script were merely translations from Bengali short stories. Nothing original was forthcoming. Guriya Kumar Ghosh's is said to be the first modern short story to be published in the Devnagari script. Jai Shankar Prasad, a rival and contemporary of Premchand, published his first story in 1911. Premchand's first story appeared in 1907 in the *Zamana* of Cawnpore, to be followed by others; and in 1908 came his first collection of short stories, *Sauz-i-Watan*. Originally published in the Persian script, these stories were soon transcribed into the Devnagari script.

Premchand broke virgin ground. He brought the short story out of dreamland and introduced contemporary themes and plausible plots, all taken from real life. Kings and fairies gave place to ordinary men and women engaged in their struggle for existence. Besides,

he imparted to the Hiudustani short story an originality, a sharpness, a variety, a sympathetic treatment, a pleasing narration and a local colouring. It became the product of the soil.

Before we plunge into a critical appreciation of Premchand's short stories, it is necessary to make a few observations on some of the important traits that characterise them.

Premchand had a wonderful grasp of the psychology of children, for whom he, specially, wrote some primers and stories, like "*Kutte ki Kahani*" and "*Ram Charcha*." Because of their poetic and lyrical qualities, these and other stories induce in children a healthy thoughtfulness ; they can be safely placed in their hands.

Many of his stories are built round animals, whom he fully understood. The bullock and the dog are his favourites. "*Purv Sanskar*," "*Do Bailon ki Katha*" and "*Dudh ka Dam*," which are built round the life of the bullock, and "*Swatwa Raksha*," in which the central figure is a horse, are of an unusual psychological interest and penetrating.

In all these stories, as also in stories of wit and humour, or those written after the ideal of art for art's sake, the imaginative element is very much marked. *Fikr-i-Dunia* and "*Laila*" have no motif, no complicated plot, no charactersation, but great literary worth.

In *Naghma-i-Ruh*, or “Atmasangit”, the heroine, the main and almost the only character, is attracted towards a distant strain of music, which is so moving that she becomes restless and wants to go into the direction of the source of strains—across the river.

The dramatic effect is created by her successive requests to, and pleadings before, the boatman. Every time she entreats him, she increases the rewards; she is prepared to pay everything except her life—no, even that. The whole incident, if at all it can be called one, is limited to a few minutes. The night, the river and the surroundings heighten the atmospheric effects in a masterly fashion and help portray the restlessness of her heart. It may be called an atmosphere story.

In an atmosphere story, so successfully attempted by Tchekov, the background, or the atmospheric haze, induces in the reader a mood, an emotion which is its essential object.

Another very successful atmosphere story is “*Pus ki Raat*.” In it, our attention is focussed on a peasant. There is only one event and the action is limited to only one night. Everything in the story impresses on our mind deeply the crushing poverty of the peasant who shivers in the January chill, for he cannot afford a blanket. So great is the cold that he cannot go out to look after the crop which is ravaged by wild cows—

resulting, again, in the aggravation of his poverty. Such phrases as "the stars in the sky were shivering" and "the breeze fanned the night chill" bring home to our mind's eye a moving picture of the biting cold. In place of a second human character, Premchand has brought in a dog, the faithful companion of the peasant; suffering is their common bond; they exchange notes and words.

This story has a compactness, a unity of time, of place, of action and of impression, denied to other stories and is first rate.

Wit and humour permeate most of Premchand's works. There are some stories, however, which are exclusive excursions into this domain. In such stories, a special atmosphere is created by description, or by suggestion through dialogues. The characters, although created through the tissue of imagination, are real, living people, who speak and act like normal human beings.

The humorous story may be of two types: either the entertaining character type, or one in which laughter may be evoked by the plot or the situation in which the characters are landed.

Of the first type, namely the entertaining character class, mention may be made of stories wherein Pandit

Mote Ram, a typical Benares Panda, a species by no means uncommon all over India, is the central figure. Humour in these stories borders on fun.

In "*Satyagraha*," the Benares officials, unable to find any other way out, bribe the venerable Pandit Mote Ram to fast unto death as a protest against the Benares citizens' decision to observe a hartal as a measure of boycotting the visit of His Excellency the Viceroy.

This satyagraha for satyagraha might have succeeded with any but the gluttonous Mote Ram, for qualities inherent in him. The mere smell of sweetmeats is enough to make him change sides. On the second night of the fast, the Congress secretary tries the trick and Pandit Mote Ram gorges the sweets. The conflict in his mind, the struggle between the soul and the flesh is beautifully depicted.

The other type of the humorous short story, wherein situation, or plot, evokes laughter, has also been successfully attempted by Premchand.

In "*Shatranj ke Khiladi*," he presents to us two Lucknow Nawabs, representative of a decadent aristocracy at the time when the British arrived in India. They are indifferent to the vital political transformation going around them—"that's how the Indian rulers lost

their empire to the British"—and lose themselves in a game of chess.

As so often happens, these sportsmen become unsportsmenlike and exchange a few hot words

Mirza Sajjad Ali says: "How on earth can you be conversant with the rules of chess? Only those born in purple can play real chess. To be born a noble is different from being made a noble. Your ancestors merely mowed grass. How can you know the rules of chess?"

The battle does not end here. They come to blows, measure swords and in the duel that ensues both of them lick the dust. The story borders on satire,

Another humorous story is "*Lottery*." Two fast friends buy a joint wager in a horse-race, but in the name of only one of them; they build castles in the air. With the approach of the fateful date, one of them harbours dishonest intentions, and the other doubts his honesty. Distrust increases.

Bikram said: "If by chance our ticket won the stake, I shall always feel sorry to have had a partner."

I was startled and said: "I too could feel the same way."

“ But the ticket is in my name.”

“ What does that matter ? ”

“ Suppose for a moment, I say : ‘ You have no share in the ticket ’ ”.

I reeled. My heart-beat stopped. Before me it was all dark

“ But it’s impossible. You could not be so dishonest.”

“ Why not ? It is just possible. Imagine—it’s 15 lakhs.”

“ Come, then. We must put down the terms on paper.”

The result of the stake goes against them and a stage of division never arises.

I asked Bikram : “ Now that it’s all over, speak out the truth. Did you harbour any dishonest intentions ? ”

Bikram replied with a smile : “ Why ask me now ? Let the curtain hide it.”

So much for the humorous stories. Another most marked characteristic of Premchand’s works was his passion for independence. He was an irredentist and worshipped every inch of this land and loved every soul of this country. His first collection of short stories, *Sauz-i-Watan*, was banned. With the gathering

national tide, the political note in his stories became more and more challenging. "Samar Yatra" was banned too and security was demanded of "Hans" for publishing alleged seditious stories.

In stories like "Suhag ki Sari," "Holi Ka Uphar," *Ashian Barbad*, "*Damul ka Qaidi*," and "*Julus*," there are pen-pictures of satyagraha and the part taken by women in such movements. In "*Bhade ka Tattoo*," it is shown how young pacifist idealists were swayed by the political temper of the times and attracted towards popular violent movements; in *Lal Feeta*, it is shown how Government servants resigned their jobs; how and why people joined the popular movements are beautifully portrayed in "Ahuti," or *Jail*, and "*Riasat ka Diwan*". In "*Holi ki Chhuti*", Premchand preaches pacifism through an ex-soldier. In *Baraat*, he illustrates how young men were attracted towards using violent means to achieve freedom; "*Qatil*" is a mirror of mental conflict between the forces of violence and non-violence, so true of the intellectual India of the last twenty years.

Premchand was opposed to certain Western ideals and particularly to their blind imitation by Indians, as we see in "*Laanat*" and *Naunk Jhaunk*; he preferred the old order, in India as we see in "*Shanti*"

“Seva Marg” and “Jwala Mukhi”, sometimes going so far as to support superstition, as demonstrated in “Nag Puja.”

Nevertheless, he assaulted all undesirable conventions, antiquated habits and customs which have eaten and are eating, into the vitals of Indian society.

In “Mantra,” Premchand exposes the hypocrisy of the Hindu and Muslim priestly class. A born Hindu, “*Afu*” shows his deep and intimate knowledge of Islamic history and traditions

“Uddhar” is a vehement protest against the dowry system ; in “Nairashya”, the system of preferring sons to daughters is criticised ; in “Kayar,” a fashionable young man is given chastisement for making love to a girl and then forsaking her ; “Adhar ” and “Dhikkar ” are a tirade on behalf of widows ; “Shanti” is a crusade against misfit unions ; and in “Naya Biah”, Premchand has some bitter things to say against a system wherein young girls are married to aged widowers ; the pathetic plight of an orphan is the theme of “*Id Gah*.”

Premchand felt deeply pained at the pitiable lot of Harijans, as can be seen from dozens of his short stories. “Mandir” and *Najat* show the hideous depths to which callousness and inhumanity on the part of Brahmins towards Harijans can lead.

These and other stories are truly a gospel of humanitarianism.

It was always the side of the victim and the oppressed that Premchand took. He always eulogised the peasant and shed bitter tears on his miserable lot. In "*Nai Roshni*", he shows the inherent nobility of the peasant, in spite of his poverty, and also how the peasant is far superior to the educated and "civilised"; in "*Bade Babu*", he exposes the heartlessness of the bureaucracy towards the peasant; the groans of peasants in *Ah-i-Bekas* and "*Beti ka Dhan*" assume a disturbing note; so great is his indignation at the peasant's pathetic plight that in "*Insaf-ki-Police*" he praises dacoits who rob the rich and pay the poor.

The hypocrisy and gross selfishness of panchayat members, who are supposed to be the custodians of law and traditions of old, are the theme of "*Mritak Bhoj*" or *Zad-i-Rah*, a very successful event story.

By his untimely death, Seth Ram Nath leaves to Sushila, his widow, a son, a daughter and a debt which he owes to Kabir Das, an influential member of the panchayat, but for which no proof exists.

Law is not on Kabir Das's side. He conspires with his panchayat colleagues, who ask Sushila to arrange a commemoration dinner. Sushila has no money. Her

ornaments are, therefore, sold. But Kabir Das's debt cannot thus be realised in full. It is now proposed that, as this money is insufficient, the house be sold. Dhani Ram claims to be late Ram Nath's best friend and considers it his solemn duty to arrange a dinner worthy of his friend's position. Really speaking, he runs a shop where *ghee* and other provisions are to be bought.

"But what of my children and me—shall we starve?" asks Sushila. Comes the panchayat's reply:

"If your children have good luck, God shall provide for them somehow or other—He who creates provides. We have told you all that was to be told. If you are still stubborn, we won't have anything to do with you. Your existence here will become an impossibility; the town-dwellers will make your life intolerable. . . . It is like living in water and inviting the hostility of crocodiles."

The house is sold at a low price, but just enough to defray Kabir Das's debt and the expenditure on the dinner.

The dinner is arranged. Everybody has a grand feast: "It is very very good. It is after a long time that we had such a good dinner—after Seth Champaram's

commemoration dinner. Surely, the credit goes to the panchayat."

Hearing this, the panchayat member, Seth Ram Nath, feels flattered. He says : "Ram Nath and I were great friends. Who, save ourselves, would have done this ? For the last four days I had no sleep."

Surely Sushila also had had no sleep, though for different reasons ; she saw a dark future before her.

The dinner over, society and the panchayat forget all about Ram Nath's family. Sushila's condition becomes pitiable ; stroke by stroke the tragedy of her life deepens ; she is asked to vacate the house which no longer belongs to her ; she shifts to rented rooms, from where she is forcibly turned out by Jhabbarmal, the landlord, for she has not been able to pay the rent.

Sushila's widow neighbour, a green-grocer, is kind and she offers Sushila and her children refuge.

Now comes a test of the sincerity of society. Sushila's son is on his death-bed. The doctor from the charitable dispensary visits the patient twice and then gives up the case, for he can expect no returns from a helpless widow. She appeals to her late husband's friends, the panchayat members, to help her by paying the doctor's fees out of charity funds.

But the panchayat is no longer interested in Ram

cannot make inroads on the jurisdiction of the panchayat."

Premchand implies here that law courts work at the bidding of the moneyed classes. In his opinion, the officials, the moneyed class and the priestly class have all conspired to grind down the honest, the innocent and the poor; the panchayat has become an engine of oppression.

It is the panchayat and society which have driven Sushila to death, and now Rewati, too, prefers a watery grave to the aged Jhabbarmal.

The exposition of an unpleasant truth, as in *Zud-i-Rah*, is the theme of many other stories, which are surcharged with Premchand's indignation at injustice. He exposes the hypocrisy, the utter hollowness of the rites and conventions upheld by conceited men who are moved by selfish motives and act in the name of religion and custom, whose custodians they manouvre to become, to exploit the poor.

Most of the short stories written by Premchand are merely translation in terms of art of his own actual observations and experiences, or those of his friends. Sometimes, a casual conversation, or some newspaper report of an insignificant, or unusual, event started in him a chain of thoughts and associations, whose result was a short story.

Quite a large number of them are written in the first person singular, some of them with marked autobiographical touches. There are others which he wrote in the third person—as an observer of events. The openings of a bulk of his short stories are spontaneous, often descriptive. The instances of short stories beginning with dialogues, or in diary or correspondence form, are comparatively few. Usually he catches our attention by a few striking phrases and straight away plunges into action.

When Premchand arrived on the scene, the Hindustani modern short story did not exist, and, consequently, there was no technique. He had himself to create technical standards.

It will be recalled that Premchand launched on his literary career at a time when people still fed on stories of romantic adventures, when Reynold, Devaki Nandan Khatri and Ratan Nath Sarshar were the vogue. Premchand started with the contemporary taste of the reader and gradually elevated it. In the early phase, he unnecessarily introduced events and episodes which eclipsed ideas and characters. Premchand studied and devoured the technique of the greatest short story writers of Russia and France, and gradually modelled himself after them. He experimented in various directions and, among his short stories, one

can find stories of all "types" and all schools. Subsequently, he evolved his own style and technique.

Above, we have given instances of action stories, the most popular form, in which there is little scope of characterisation and in which events and episodes predominate. Characterisation, though important, is not the primary consideration. The backbone is the plot, which may be defined as the skeleton of the short story, when shorn of characterisation and dialogue. On an original, striking and convincing plot depends the success of the short story. And the success of the plot depends primarily upon the dramatic element which creates tense emotional moments.

The success of the short story depends also on the gradual unfolding of plot, which is inextricably interwoven, interdependent and dovetailed with incident, setting and character.

The story flows on smoothly, more or less like a mountain stream whose destiny is certain but nobody can say what lies at the next turning—a vale or a rock?

The end of the short story is necessarily a dramatic climax, although it is skillfully camouflaged. To this everything else is subordinated. The dramatic element is introduced by adjusting the sequence

of events according to a definite pattern. There are many crises before the climax is reached. Presentation of each successive crisis heightens the dramatic effect, or suspense, and accelerates action of the story.

To grip, or rather increase, the reader's interest, the plot is twisted and complicated by introducing in it certain knots. These knots, or crises, urge the reader to read on and on, till the climax is reached. For when the climax is reached the reader's interest is at the highest water-mark, it hits him in the face. The story is at an end ; it's all over ; the curtain rings down.

The short story is a single artistic unit, an organic whole guided by what Edgar Allan Poe termed "totality", that is a unity of impression, of action, of place and of time. "The short story", says one definition, "deals with a single character, a single event, a single emotion, or a series of emotions called forth by a single situation."

The narrative unity is very necessary. Narration accelerates flow ; the story unfolds itself, advancing gradually towards the climax. In the short story, climax is the thing.

When Premchand was decided on the motif and the climax of a story, it was nearly complete. Now it only remained to develop its germ, to adapt or to modify it. He thought and thought and thought—

till it formulated itself in his mind and the characters were chiselled. It was a sort of a mental rehearsal, a gradually clarifying process, till the story had ripened itself, and everything was crystal clear in his mind. So clearly did he visualise his characters that he instinctively knew how a particular character would behave when placed in certain circumstances. His story was built on coldly calculated curves.

Motif plays an important part in Premchand's stories; it animates all of them; it is the soul of the story, just as character, plot and atmosphere constitute its body.

Literature for Premchand was too serious a subject. A successful satirist, he wanted to rouse the people—to stir them to action.

What characterised his short stories was a tincture of idealism. A writer with a purpose, he made the short story a vehicle of uplift. He wanted art to be the criticism of life. The primary object of the short story, according to him, was to cause an emotional experience in the reader by presenting to him an incident, a character and an atmosphere for his elevation.

Premchand's outlook was essentially in line with the ancient Indian ideals. "The goal of India and the goal of Eupoe", he wrote, "are very much different.

Europe seeks the beautiful ; India seeks the true. Europe may write stories for entertainment, but India cannot accept that ideal. Dharma is the breath of our life. We are not free. But our culture and civilisation are far higher than those of the West. Let the realist Europe score over us in the battle of life ; we cannot, we must not cut ourselves away from our old moorings."

Nevertheless, he qualified the statement and admitted : "The short story is a product of the heart, and not of laws and rules. Rules are there only to help us. And, again, no rules are absolute. Of course, there are limitations on the writer, for we are with society, and we are in society."

Defining an ideal short story, he said : "It must throw light on some aspect of life ; it must examine critically, and courageously, the conventions of society ; it must deepen the inherent instinct in man for the good, the true and the beautiful ; it must quicken his sense of curiosity."

This, however, does not mean that the short story must be a sermon. Premchand regarded the short story which even remotely sermonised as an outright failure. He believed that every short story to be successful should be based on a psychological truth.

Troubles upon troubles make a man desperate ; his

desperation makes him hold; his weaknesses disappear; his manly qualities come to the surface and he succeeds in surmounting all obstacles; the pain that a father experiences when he sees his son going astray and the selfless love of a mother for her son—all these are instances of psychological truths.

Indeed for motif, fundamental inspiration, Premchand sometimes had to wait. Perhaps he never wrote more than two stories in a month. For livelihood, of course, he sometimes wrote even a two or three page story without any plot or any motif. One of his publishers has told me that once the 'form' needed two more pages. He wrote to Premchand to send him a two page story, and by the return of post it came! Such stories full of literary flourishes, however, being exceptions, he always based them on a moral message.

For the basic psychological truth, the moral basis, Premchand searched and searched. This was for him the real job of the short story.

"Plots I always weave with a view to bring out what is beautiful and manly in human characters," he wrote. "It is a complicated process, sometimes inspired by a person, or by an incident or by a dream, but I must have some psychological basis for my story"

Premchand believed in the essential nobility of human nature. In "Mantra," one of his successful stories,

he relates how a rich town doctor refuses to treat the dying—and the only—son of a poor villager, who, it is later revealed, is a conscientious and righteous man, in possession of a formula which can cure snake-bite. When the only son of the same doctor is bitten by a snake, resulting in the boy's death, the old villager hears of this and persuades himself to take revenge for his own son's death. There is a great conflict in his mind. His sense of duty, however, asserts itself. In spite of himself, he goes, because he must go, and brings the doctor's dead son to life by repeating the secret formula. Indifferently turning away his face from the doctor and his reward of thousands of rupees, he returns home, glad to have saved a life.

How a dishonest man can be made honest is related in "Chamatkar" or *Zewar ka Dabba*. It is a successful "mood story"; a state of mind is created under the impact of unforeseen, but incessant, pin-pricks of life, so as to kindle the reader's sympathy.

Mr. Chandar Parkash is a coach to the son of a Thakur who places implicit confidence in him. He, however, betrays his master's trust and steals a box of valuable ornaments. The episode is forgotten. The Thakur, not knowing the facts, still places his confidence in Mr. Chandar Parkash and helps him more than once in life and gets him a job.

So lavish is his generosity that at each step Mr.

Chander Prakash feels ashamed of himself. Ultimately, he decides to, and actually does, replace the box in the Thakur's house.

The delineation of characters in every short story is the most important thing. The characters must actually be from real life and they must be convincing, maintaining an "illusion of reality." This is achieved by a carefully cultivated personal observation and contact with varying types of humanity. "The majority of my characters". Premchand wrote, "are drawn from real life, though they are sufficiently veiled. Unless a character has some basis in reality, it's shadowy, uncertain and unconvincing."

Character may either be created directly, through description, although it is a weak device, or indirectly, namely through dialogue, action or suggestion—the best and the most effective device.

In the earlier phase of his literary career, Premchand used more of descriptive, namely the direct method. With the progress of years, however, it gave place to suggestion, or the indirect method. His description, by its spontaneity, helps in portraying successful characters.

He exercises a great economy of words, the language being very much condensed, There are no redundancies Every sentence, every line, every word pulls its weight and adds to the final effect, namely the climax. Some-

times by delicate touches, or by mere suggestion through action or dialogue, he throws an event into bold relief and leaves the reader to understand much by implication.

In "Shankh Nad." "Bitan is educated and can put his signature on the postman's register. He is very experienced, thoughtful and wise. In place of the usual 'mirzai', he puts on a shirt. At times he smokes a cigarette, for this raises him in the estimation of others."

In "*Bade Ghar Ki Beti*", an action story, "Anandi comes of a noble family. Her father is a Taluqdar and owns a little estate. He owns the usual paraphernalia of a Taluqdar—a magnificent palace, chandeliers, an elephant, three hounds, falcons, eagles, a honorary magistracy and a debt. His name is Bhup Singh (the King of Lions)."

The various epithets above are steps, each portraying an important aspect of Bhup Singh's life. If we omit one step, the character loses one colour-note. The reader is made to move, unconsciously, from one stepping stone to another, quickly and deftly.

To heighten the contrast, Premchand gets Anandi married to Shrikanth who, though educated, is poor. "Not to speak of palaces and elephants, here there is no *bahli* (tonga). Anandi brought with her a pair of silken slippers, but there is no house-garden here. There are not even windows in the house; the floor is without a

carpet, and the walls without pictures. It is just an ordinary house of an ordinary married villager."

The success of a short story hinges on the successful portrayal of the character. The characterisation story, which centres round a single person from whose point of view the situation is unfolded, is considered to be literature of the highest type, for it is human life in miniature. The chances of successful characterisation are much greater in a novel, and it needs a good deal of ingenuity to portray and develop a character successfully on the "shortened canvas" of the short story.

The primary function here is of revealing the character. The development of incidents or plot is, therefore, an ancillary affair. Really speaking, there is little action and there is little plot. The events by themselves have no significance whatsoever; they merely help to throw the character in bold relief, to bring to light the hidden aspects of things, to acquaint us with the feelings and emotions of the characters. Characters are landed in delicate situations because of qualities inherent in them.

A successful characterisation story is "Ghar Jamai", or *Khana-i-Damad*. Haridhan, a peasant, on his father's death, leaves his kind and affectionate step-mother to live with his in-laws, where he takes all pains to bring prosperity to the in-laws' family and where he is respected

and honoured, the son-in-law's position in an Indian family being unique.

Familiarity breeds contempt. Thanks to his long stay, respect for Haridhan disappears; he is now maltreated, his brothers-in-law, his mother-in-law and even his wife call him names; he gets disgusted and realises his mistake.

He returns home alone, for his wife does not leave her parents, and later she marries another person. In his home, Haridhan is welcomed. His mother is kind; she says: "These children are the children of your father, if not your mother's. Treat them as brothers."

The delineation of the main character in the story is masterly. The events are subordinated to characterisation, and revolve round the person of Haridhan.

"*Kafan*", another very successful characterisation story, is an admirable survey of Ghisu's life, his tastes and his feelings and emotions, with which Premchand is thoroughly conversant. Ghisu is not merely an individual; he is the representative of the victimised strata of society, whose suppressed psychology makes him fatalistic, callous and indifferent to life and pain.

"*Kafan*" is the epitome of Ghisu's nature. But, for obvious technical reasons of smoothening the flow and bringing into relief Ghisu's outlook on life,

Premchand has split the main character into two, Ghisu and his son, Madho, who is a true reflection of his father. Both of them are idlers; they pilfer potatoes and peas to keep themselves going; they do little manual work.

For one year, since Madho's marriage, Budhia, his wife, takes all pains to feed them and to bring a sort of prosperity to the family. The story opens with her writhing in the throes of child-birth.

Premchand knows Ghisu and his tribe inside out. To portray him in the truest colours, he picks out a supreme moment, at which Ghisu's nature is at its height—Budhia's death for lack of care.

Neither Ghisu nor Madho even attend to her. Each is suspicious of the other for the possible lion's share of the potatoes, still being baked, if either of them went inside!

Every turn in the story reveals yet another glimpse of Ghisu's character, as for instance the description of the feast; every action of his is significant. Stroke by stroke as by the painter's brush the colour of Ghisu's character deepens. He collects money to provide for Budhia's last rites and goes to the market-place.

"We have enough firewood to cremate her. Have we not, Madho?" inquires Ghisu.

“Yes,” replies Madho, “enough. What we now need is a shroud.”

“Let us go in for an inexpensive one.”

“Yes Rather an inexpensive one. It would be quite dark by the time she is cremated, and who cares to look at the shroud?”

“What an irony? She who never got enough rags to cover her body all her life must have a new shroud on her death.”

“It is going to be burnt with the dead body. Is it not?” says Madho.

They know each understands the thought-processes of the other. They wander about the market-place and somehow, as if directed by some supernatural power, they find themselves in front of a liquor-shop. Mutual consultation is unnecessary; they enter it and get drunk.

Ghisu says: “What if we had not a shroud? It would have been burnt after all. It could not have accompanied her in after-life.”

He feels supremely happy and adds. “She has made us happy. Surely she has earned merit by it Oh God, take her to heaven. We bless her from the depths of our souls. Never in all our life did we have such a sumptuous feast.”

Premchand does not necessarily share Ghisu's view and philosophy of life. But he understands Ghisu too well. The keynote of the story is Premchand's sincerity and sympathy with the oppressed classes turned fatalist. He reflects :

“There was nothing unexpected about this phenomenon, this psychology in a society wherein the lot of those who worked hard day in and day out was in no way better than that of Ghisu's or Madho's; wherein the clever and the dishonest enriched themselves at the cost of the poor. Indeed, we might credit Ghisu with more wisdom than the peasants. For, unlike them, instead of gossiping, he enjoyed himself in the company of those who were the terror of the village.”

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B—Books by Premchand

SHORT STORIES

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" „ Purnima "

" „ Prasun "

" „ Tirth "

" „ Pratima "

" „ Pramod "

" „ Dwadashi "

“ Prem Panchami ”

“ „ Chaturthi ”

“ Panch Phul ”

“ Kafan ”

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In the Persian script, these stories appeared in the following collections :

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“Rangabhumi ” *Chaugan-i-Hasti*

“Kayakalp ” *Parda-i-Majaz*

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" <i>Karbala</i> " :	a drama
<i>Ruhani Shadi</i> :	"
" <i>Sangram</i> " :	"
" <i>Prem ki Bedi</i> " :	"
" <i>Kutte ki Kahani</i> "	for children
" <i>Jungle ki Kahani</i> "	"
" <i>Ram Charcha</i> "	"
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TRANSLATIONS

- " *Srishti ka Arambh.* " : G. B. Shaw's " *Methuselah.* "
- " *Tolstoy ki Kahani* " : Tolstoy's stories.
- " *Sukh Das* " : G. Eliot's " *Silas Mariner* "
- " *Ahankar* " : Anatole France's " *Thais* "
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- " *Azad Katha* " (abridged) : Sarshar's *Fisana-i-Azad*
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